PROTAGONIST
A geologist, who is an anarchist.

SECONDARY CHARACTER
A student, who is popular among the people.

PLOT
It's an apocalyptic story about resistance and revolution. It kicks off in the dunes with the sentence: "For the second time in a day, the clocks around the world stopped."
(Note that: this story takes place across the Solar System.)

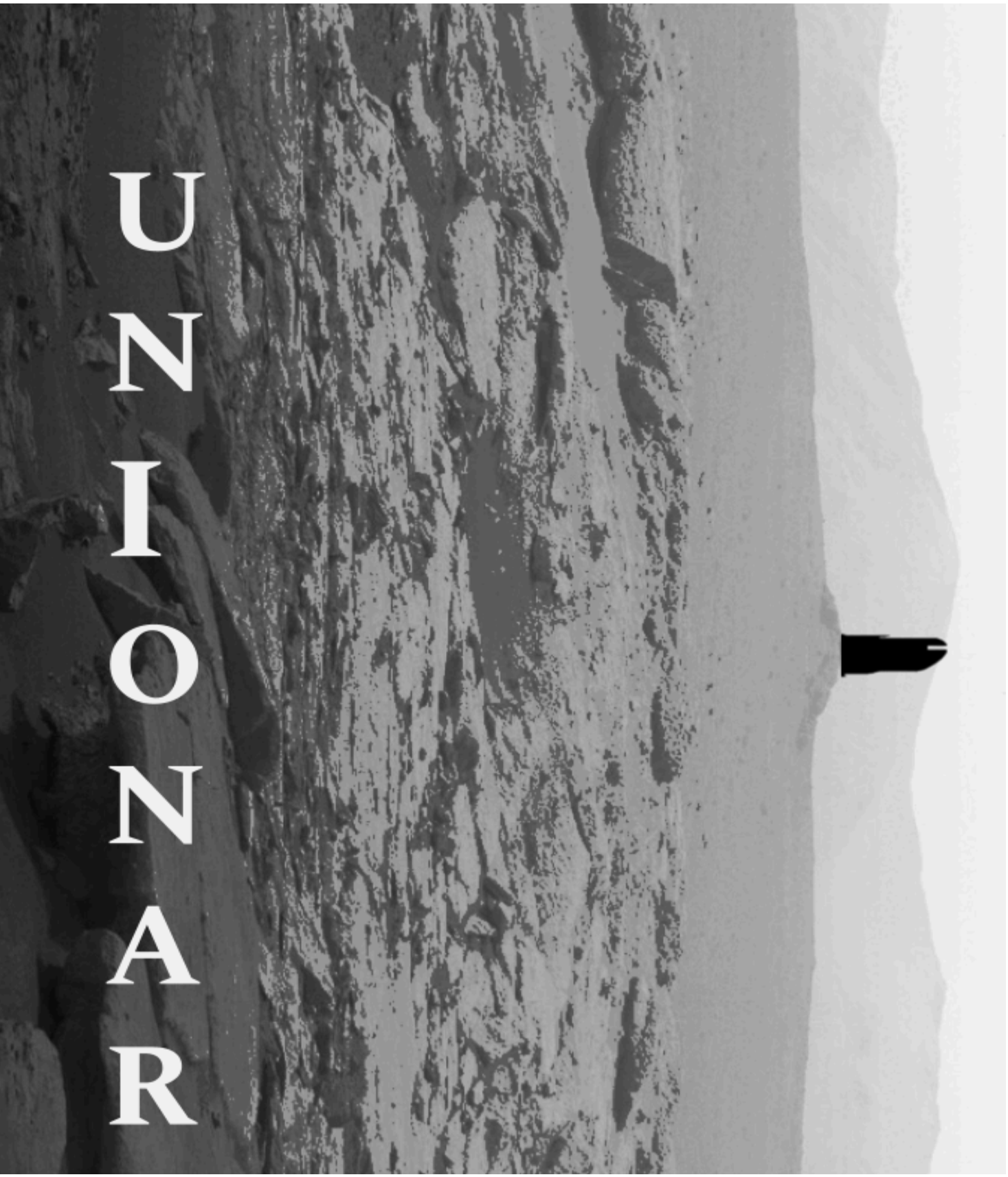
A parallel universe will play a big role in the plot.

(Note that the info above highlighted in blue were some simple details a generator gave me to start off the story)

To my family, Amy, Mrs. Riley, Cixin Liu, along with many various authors.

Your unwavering support, encouragement, and inspiration have been the driving forces behind this story. This book is built off of, and inspired by the support and concepts given from each of you, who have enriched my life in unique and meaningful ways. Thank you for being my pillars of strength and inspiration.

With heartfelt gratitude, Mario Duque Souza


UNIONAR

BOOK 1

Unionar

1

Drepno

"To what extent must we protect the people we love?"

-**Matthew Knowles, present leader of The Grand Unionar of Humanity.**

"For the second time in a day, the clocks around us… just stop?" mumbled Drepno to himself as he felt grains of sand with his hand and lightly tapped on his watch.

He stood up and looked around the desert he was in. It wasn't any average desert, though. Drepno was on the red plains of Mars, specifically Arabia Terra, a highland plain near its equator. He rearranged his watch to the time of Earth as humanity across the solar system did. This was done for the sole fact that Earth was where the Capitol stood. As he tinkered with his watch, he set it to the following date:

September 18, 2605

Drepno, like many other geologists on Mars sent to neighboring areas of Arabia Terra to do intern work, had been searching for any marks of previous life forms on the planet. Not just bacterial life, but multicellular organisms that could've existed before humanity. Drepno knew this was a question that couldn't be answered by simply examining the dust around

him; Galgoria and the rest of humanity had littered the Martian dirt with previous activities, layering the landscape with *waste*. However, he was *ordered* to examine dust, and so he did.

As Drepno dusted off his pants, he couldn't help but stare angrily at the massive utopia of Galgoria, only a mile away. The rows of pitch-black obelisk towers were massive, extending beyond view. Still, Galgoria looked like it was placed in the middle of nowhere, especially in contrast with the orange horizon behind it and the rocks near it. The ink-black color of each skyscraper and of the Galgorian walls contrasted with the landscape. It was off-putting.

Galgoria was one of the central hubs for humanity, being the first Martian settlement, built over four centuries ago after a massive upbringing of technology caused all of humanity to unite into a single nation— The Grand Unionar of Humanity. Located in the northern region of Arabia Terra, Galgoria was slightly above the Cassini Crater, with a portion of the city within the crater itself. The megalopolis spanned more than 50,000 square miles of area, and was split into thousands of districts and wards. Even though its size dwarfed that of many other twenty-first century settlements, it all amounted to a moderately-sized dark spot in Mars' geography. Although Drepno despised the almost-dystopian growth of human civilization, he still had hope for humanity. He wanted humanity to reach the interstellar bounds of space, just not this way.

He picked up his backpack and began his walk back to Galgoria. As he walked towards the distant city, he looked back at his watch, surprised to see that it, like many digital clocks across the Solar System, had malfunctioned twice in a day. He was used to there being at most, one

planetary or Solar-System-wide clock malfunction due to the stringent time orders from the Capitol, along with the average timezone errors and a rogue solar flare every now and then. This was different. However, he just shrugged it off. As Drepno stood at an entrance checkpoint of Galgoria, he stared at the city's tall, dark, border walls ahead that seemed to extend on forever. The Martian National Guards in the area seemed as if they were on high alert, expecting something.

Unlike Drepno and many other people who weren't too knowledgeable in the field of elite-class astrophysics, those high up in humanity's new caste system had found this change in the number of solar-wide clock malfunctions to be part of a high-level emergency, one that wouldn't only affect human civilization, but lead to the revelation of a universal— no, dimensional truth.

2

Xi

"The Martian Equator Region is the safest of the planet; centuries of piled activity and technology have warmed it significantly. Similarly, attempts have been made to mass produce ozone compounds. Ultraviolet radiation, however, is another story. We have a superconductor for that."

-**Trip to Mars: the Guidebook to Cold Deserts.**

A confused college student stared down at Neptune, admiring its cold yet beautiful dark blue hue, wondering what could lie below its thick and deadly atmosphere. This college student in question was Xi Lin, and she was in observatory ship *Discovery,* on a trip completing her biology courses. Aboard the ship with her were around 150 other college students alike, all taking note of the magnificent blue planet before their return to Mars, where most of them lived.

The ship had just finished its tour around Neptune and planned to dock in the Galgorian spaceport, where they would graduate from their final course. The ship was set on auto-pilot but still had crew members and pilots to ensure a safe journey back and forth. All of humanity's technological progress in the 27th century set the estimated travel time to Mars at a total of a single week, which was extremely fast when compared to the travel speeds of older spaceships and satellites.

Xi's gaze at Neptune was quickly distracted by a friend of hers. "Hey Xi, can you help me with this stupid watch? It malfunctioned again for some reason and its hands stopped moving," asked her friend, Laura Kide.

Xi grabbed the watch from her and re-arranged the hands to the central time on Earth. As she was moving the watch's hands, she realized

that something was off. This was the second time Laura's and Xi's watch had stopped moving in a day. Earlier, they'd both asked eachother about their watches malfunctioning despite their watch differences; Xi used a digital one, but Laura preferred the expensive, classic analog. After Xi gave her the now-fixed watch, Laura gladly thanked her.

"Thank you! Oh and by the way, there is gonna be a party in the D-One Lower Deck of the Ship to celebrate our return, everybody wants to see you there!"

Xi Lin was the daughter of two highly successful astrophysicists with her father, Zhao Lin, leading the research for several space exploration corporations, and her mother, Maeng Soomin, making breakthroughs in the field of energy. The family of three was high-ranking and known by most people, making her a popular student among others in the touring spacecraft she was in. Every now and then, Xi would ponder as to how many bribes her family may have been involved in with the Grand Unionar of Humanity (Often abbreviated as *GUH* in her textbooks).

As Xi entered her cramped dorm, she placed her backpack and her other notes in a velcro holder next to her walled bed. Suddenly, the dark void that could be seen beyond the hardened window below her shined miraculously. Almost everything was illuminated. Xi saw the beautiful purple haze that the Milky Way carried. She also noticed that she was on the dark side of Neptune, where the sun's light wasn't emitted as strongly and allowed her to see the glimmer of stars below her.

Looking at the assortment of stars below her, Xi couldn't help but feel a sense of existential dread. Every bead of radiating light in the unthinking *dark* was its own story, potentially with its own beings, living day-to-day

just as she did. She couldn't help but feel so small and meaningless compared to the universe and its large scale. *How*? *Why do I live in the same place as* ***all*** *of this*? She wondered why— or perhaps how— she existed, what her purpose was, and why all of this came to be. She was unconsciously asking herself, *if energy cannot be created or destroyed, how did we get here*? She wondered if there was somebody, or something watching over all of the universe, or if it was just put in place and arranged for no reason at all, and set to die out eventually, for no reason at all as well.

A now anxious Xi shook her head and remembered that she had a party to attend. She flew over to the door of her dorm and opened it. The party was on the lower deck, so she quickly began zooming across the ship's halls. All decks were connected to the central lift, where the crew operated, so she'd have to see the crew in action on her way there.

As Xi floated across the center of the ship, she saw many of the crew members moving around in a rather panicked manner. She looked around the center to find the chief of engineering, who was good friends with her father. She found him in the corner of the central room complaining to one of his colleagues and pointing at a live map of the Solar System. She quickly flew over to him.

"Marcus! What's going on?"

"Xi...!"

Marcus paused, thinking about his words in a slight haze before speaking.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. Weren't you invited to a party?"

Marcus continued, this time in an insistent tone,"Go on, celebrate with them."

Before Xi could say anything, he waved her off— but before she left, she took a quick look at the map. What she saw made her heart stop. On the map, Earth's central time on the panel atop the screen was paused, and the contents of the map below the clock were oddly terrifying. Next to the Solar System, various undocumented objects in almost the same position as the Solar System were set there, mirroring it. Xi saw that the closest object to Neptune had intercepted the Oort Cloud. Before Xi could say anything about what she had just seen, she was quickly ushered into the lower half of the ship by Marcus.

As Xi stood in front of the entrance to the lower deck of the ship, she was welcomed by Laura and was given some water in a small squeeze pouch. As Xi floated around the lower deck while others were celebrating, she couldn't help but think about what she saw on the virtual map. *Was it all a system glitch? The clock stopped two times today. Does any of this make sense? Is there an exact copy of the solar system that somehow got here?*

Xi brushed off these thoughts as crazy ones and decided to enjoy the party she studied so hard for. *It is probably a malfunction,* Xi thought to herself, attempting to drown her thoughts. Xi couldn't talk to her parents or anybody else outside the ship about her thoughts, as she was near Neptune; practically near the end of the Solar System.

3

Checkpoint

"Neptune is quiet. Too quiet..."

-Human Archives; Xi Lin's Notebook.

As Drepno stood in the line leading to the ID processing checkpoint, he noticed the Guardsmen around him. Even if he couldn't see through their thick visors, he could clearly tell that they seemed somewhat panicked. As a security chief stood next to his part of the line to monitor people, Drepno could hear yelling coming from the chief's radio.

Galgoria, although the largest settlement on Mars, was not the only city that inhabited it. Many smaller villages and settlements were scattered around Mars but were very small and impoverished in comparison. Though all of humanity was united as a nation, Galgoria had an exception. To maintain its *utopian* levels of stability, only a certain portion of people were given citizenship into the city.

Everybody could apply to gain citizenship access into the city, but the process was very rigorous and often rigged. As a result, many people resorted to crossing over Galgoria's walls, or joining small hostile groups that would make an attempt to sneak through its checkpoints every now and then. Other groups, filled with *radicalists*, as quoted by the Unionar, frequently worked together to try and bring down the Grand Unionar of Humanity and its other settlements across the Solar System. Their attempts

were feeble, and met with loss. If some group made an attempt that had gone wrong— they'd be wiped clean, disappearing as a whole. On Earth, also known as The Capitol, such groups also ceased to exist at all.

Underground settlements on Venus and the bases on distant moons were too sparse to spark any flames. Mars, however, was growing with unrest as various groups expanded in size. Although Drepno wasn't any more prosperous than those who attempted to cross the city's borders, he was lucky enough to gain an internship, giving him citizenship into the city to safely continue his *work*.

As Drepno looked around himself, he could feel a heightened tension growing in the people around him. He saw multiple fusion-powered jets stream above him, as the instructions given by the checkpoint guards got louder. Soon, a siren began blaring, and the guards began to raise their weapons at the people in the line, yelling at them to quickly show a citizenship ID, while yelling the word "Raiders!" into their comms.

"Sir, show me your CID!" said one of the guards, pushing the tip of his rifle at Drepno's chest. Drepno quickly pulled his backpack off his shoulder and shifted through it as fast as he could, knowing that another border raid would occur at this checkpoint soon, and that if he didn't show his citizenship ID now, he would surely be left outside Galgoria for weeks on end.

Drepno pulled out a crumpled-up CID from his backpack and gave it to the guard. As the guard glanced at the CID and back at Drepno, he said, "Processing is being rushed here, but you are good to go. Send this man through!"

The guard shoved Drepno out of his way and began quickly rummaging through the backpacks of other people. As Drepno was about to pass through a checkpoint gate and enter the city, he turned around to face the landscape behind him. Within it, he could barely see the silhouette of multiple military-grade Humvees coming from across the red planet's horizon.

Drepno's view was quickly abrupted, as the door he was peeking through automatically closed itself for lockdown while people who'd recently been passed ran through the entrance. As Drepno left the processing building, he quickly began running over to a transportation port.

Because of Galgoria's massive size, the transportation systems that the city offered needed to be very fast and efficient. One of the main vehicle types used in the city's public transportation were hovering vehicles that were able to ascend to heights of 300 feet, allowing them to fly over and around the cramped city. These vehicles were most commonly called the hovcrafts by the people of Mars, but their names varied throughout the different settlements set in the Solar System.

Sitting within a small hovcraft, Drepno stared outside as he flew between piling skyscrapers and buildings. Each building had an advertisement on it of some sort, with the Unionar's slogan on the bottom.

*We protect those we love. We protect **you**.*

After a twenty minute ride on the hovcrafts, Drepno walked around the streets of his district, trying to find a small store to buy water. Soon, Drepno found one. In front of him, he saw a small convenience store cramped between two dark towers, both with small metallic pipes

engulfing their walls. As Drepno opened the door to the convenience store, something stopped him immediately; distant gunfire.

The now unnerved Drepno was used to hearing distant gunfire, especially in such a large, hard-to-manage city. However, he was surprised to hear it in such amounts, especially since his district was deep in the utopia and far away from the walls. Something was off. After Drepno had purchased water, he began the short trek to his apartment.

Did raiders pass through a checkpoint?

Upon entering the complex, he could immediately tell that it was ravaged by raiders. He walked over to the lobby room of the complex, where papers and objects were all scattered and broken. Next to him, Drepno saw an axe thrown into a wall, where it remained inserted. His gaze into the counter shook him deeply; the clerk of the complex lay dead. His body had multiple gunshot wounds, his eyes wide open with his face unchanged from when he was alive. The clerk had a pistol in his left hand.

Why does he have a gun?

As Drepno looked away from the body in disgust, he observed that all of the objects on the clerk's desk weren't stolen, although scrambled, almost as if the raiders were looking for something, and that stealing wasn't their primary intention.

As Drepno slowly approached a computer monitor on the desk, which lay mostly untouched, he began to realize that the raiders weren't searching for something, but rather someone. The computer monitor displayed the map of the apartment complex, and a big circle was drawn over the monitor, highlighting room B74; Drepno's room.

Drepno was shocked. *What do they want from me?* He slid over the desk and grabbed the axe that was inserted into the wall. *Guess I'll find out.* Drepno's life had been plain ever since he'd cut his ties with his old settlement near Galgoria, and he had practically *nothing* to lose. The adrenaline rush he had received from being in such a situation was more than enough to get him moving past the apartment lobby, but the realization that a group of people wanted something from him gave him even more adrenaline.

As Drepno began ascending the stairway to level B, his adrenaline died out quickly at the view of multiple bodies lying dead. Drepno's neighbor, some man he had only seen every once in a while, lay atop one of the staircases, with his body completely pummeled, and his face; almost indistinguishable from the man he once knew. Five other bodies could be seen as Drepno ran up the flight of stairs, but only the view of his neighbor's body was enough to make him run faster. As he passed each body, he was surprised to see that each person carried weapons on them, and seemed as if they died in combat.

Doesn't Galgoria restrict weapons to only the Martian National Guard?

Drepno arrived at level B, and kicked down the metal stairway door, revealing a long hallway with red neon lights between the metallic plates of its walls. The walls emitted a soft glow that seamlessly blended with the neon lights embedded in the floor, casting an otherworldly view, but this was normal for people at this time and age like Drepno, as the many cultural structures from earlier days of mankind had been discarded.

As he walked into the hall, he saw more bodies scattered across it, making him grip the axe even tighter. Once he was nearing his room, he

made sure to look around himself to see if any of the raiders were nearby, waiting for him. Currently, he was standing near the door of room B60, and he would need to take a sharp turn around the halls in order to reach the hallway that contained rooms B61 to B80.

With a sharp turn, Drepno dashed to his door and kicked it down. Drepno slowly entered his room. His apartment was in crystal clean shape, with every item being the way it was when he left earlier that day, which was off putting, because almost several other rooms in Level B were broken into, and the hallways were trashed by stray bullets and unfortunate witnesses, but his room was in perfect shape.

Drepno walked to his living room which contained a small television on the floor. The TV was playing something. Drepno kneeled to get a closer look, as the amount of Martian dust he lived and worked with had somewhat blinded him. The television screen displayed an ominous-looking flag, with text at its bottom. “The Truth Shall Seek You”. Drepno recognized this; this was the motto of one of the largest raiding groups on the planet; The Seekers of Truth. This was all a trap.

Drepno felt something cold touch the back of his head followed by the sound of a gun clicking. Drepno, realizing the situation he was in, dropped his axe and raised his hands in the air slowly.

A deep voice from behind him said, “We need you.”

“Need me? For what?”, said Drepno, with his arms still raised.

“The Catalyst. We will soon expose and publicize information surrounding our parallel Solar System, along with documentation on all terrible actions of the Unionar. However, the people won’t believe us over

them; they censor too easily. We need a dealbreaker— a catalyst— a final bit of information that will topple down everything else. Something with a stamp of the Unionar itself on it. We have chosen you, along with four others in this apartment complex, to join us. We want— no, we *need* you to find that dealbreaker. Your hidden hatred for this future and your ability to search for answers in your internship as a geologist makes a perfect match for us."

"Uh… W-what? Parallel Solar System?"

"Three days ago, an exact, parallel mirror of our Solar System was placed next to ours by something beyond our comprehension. In this parallel Solar System, everything is aligned with ours. Gravity doesn't seem to work in this system— instead, this Mirrored Solar System orbits normally and acts in the same manner as ours. As a matter of fact, though theoretical, this conversation is happening in that other Solar System, at the exact same time, word for word. The Unionar has been attempting its best to hide this other Solar System by using the space walls built around Pluto's orbit once used for potential extraterrestrial defense. They moved the space walls to the direction of the Mirror System to cover up the outlines and traces of the mirror planets while attempting to scramble the radio waves coming from the system. We don't know why."

"You raiders are always filled with propaganda, trying to get people to join your 'movement' using lies."

Drepno heard a click behind his head and instantly regretted his rebuttal as the man let out a chuckle.

"You think *this* is propaganda? Remember the signs you watch on your everyday commute? *Subliminal messaging*. We don't want to kill you, but

you must come with us. If you don't walk out of this building with us in the next five minutes, I *will* pull the trigger. I've told you too much to keep you under no protection."

Realizing the odds at stake, Drepno nodded and slowly stood up. He turned around and looked at the man's face. The man had long but well-managed blonde hair, with two braids forming from the top sides of his head to his shoulders, giving him an almost Viking-like appearance, though Drepno wasn't able to compare the Viking style to the man's. Such a civilization as the Vikings were entangled far more than millenia-deep into history, and now stood as only oral history; dependent on the few who could recall it, through all of GUH censorship. Drepno also noticed a large scar across the man's face, positioned beside his left eyebrow. He followed the man, along with 10 others, consisting of both Raiders and the new 'recruits' into the back alley of the complex. Drepno was now a part of the Seekers of Truth, whether he fully believed their morals or not.

4

Cover-up

"The Valles Marineris Canyon and its surrounding regions are home to fifty key GUH military and air bases nicknamed 'Canyon Cariveers'. This area hosts the strongest forces of

Mars. The low temperatures, however, cause its soldiers to follow a 'thermal suit' rule the moment they exit outside a building at night. Most don't follow that rule."

-**Map of Mars; a description of the Southern Canyons.**

Even though she was very popular and viewed highly by other people, Xi Lin was socially awkward. Due to this, Xi was not a big fan of parties, even though she was invited to many of them. Two hours had passed since the beginning of the party, and the very bored Xi was not able to talk to Laura, her only close friend, as she was busy talking to other students and Xi didn't want to interrupt her conversation.

Xi's mind snapped back to those few minutes of nihilism she had experienced on the dark side of Neptune. Those few minutes of wonder and fear of the unknown were the first time she had experienced any true complexion and purpose. Xi's life had been a bland pattern when one went over it.

Regardless of her high-value background, Xi lived a rather ordinary life, one of taking school until a certain age and what would be working for the rest of her life afterward. This type of life never prompted any challenges or any time to truly admire the beauty of life or the wonder of the world, until that moment in her dorm, where the position of the Sun and Neptune in comparison to that of the ship aligned so perfectly, as to illuminate the void she had been living in.

Since the Sun was still on the opposite side of Neptune, Xi wanted to get one last look before the ship would begin its almost straightforward trip to Mars. Maybe she could find an answer to what she saw on Marcus' display. Xi quickly zoomed out of the lower deck and proceeded to head to the observation room.

Upon entry, Xi saw the beautiful view of the universe encompassing her, as the entirety of the room was a dome of the clearest glass. The view was otherworldly to Xi, as she had never used her free time to enter the room. The view of the universe that surrounded the room shook Xi on another level than that of the view of her dorm. Just the simple view of what the universe had to offer in the observatory was enough to awe her. For the next thirty minutes, she looked outside from the center of the observation deck, floating aimlessly in it, as if she were outside the ship itself, and exploring the cosmos.

In the view of the universe, something caught Xi's eyes. Opposite to the sight of Neptune's dark blue surface on the left, a small, pale dot seen from across the observatory's view.

Is that a moon?

Xi directed her attention to the small dot to her right and saw patterns on it similar to Neptune. Using the observatory telescope, she zoomed in on the small dot, and what she saw shook her.

It's a planet.

Magnifying the lens, more detail was revealed. Her eyes widened.

It was an exact, identical copy of Neptune.

In front of the planet, a tiny, smaller black dot could be seen. Using the strongest magnification available in the room, she enhanced the view. That black dot was a ship, with its shape being the exact same as the one she was on, flying in front of a massive blue planet, just like her ship. A bright light appeared behind the planet, temporarily blinding Xi and causing her to move her head back from the telescope. The view of the rest

of the universe faded to darkness as the sun behind her Neptune shone brightly as well.

Suddenly, a hissing sound as a gas poured into other rooms outside the observatory could be heard. The already-shocked Xi was a little unnerved by the sound but continued to float to the observatory door to exit. As she grabbed a handle on the wall and was about to press the button to open the door, something froze her. Sharp shouts. Not shouts of terror, but sharp shouts of sudden pain that only lasted a second before being cut off. Xi opened a small slide on the observatory door, a small window, allowing her to view the ship's halls outside the room.

The view of the halls was covered by a yellow fog of sorts. After a few seconds of waiting for the haze to clear out, Xi got a view of what happened. Five students were aimlessly floating and twitching in the hallway, with their faces turned purple and saliva flying out of their mouths. It was nerve gas. Xi almost fainted at the sight; she'd never seen a dead body. She immediately closed the small slide and grabbed the small sack in her pocket to vomit in it.

Xi was scared and confused. *What just happened? Why is a nerve gas system built into the ship? I want to get out of here, but I can't.* Xi felt like breaking the hardened glass separating the observation deck from the deadly void of space. She knew she'd die if she did so, and that she probably couldn't even break the glass in the first place, but she just wanted to get out, even if it meant dying in the process.

Two years ago, Xi failed her Mechanical Engineering and Control-Systems Engineering courses and had forgotten most of her knowledge. But from the little she'd retained, she knew that there was most

likely a mechanism to bring the left-over gas back into its containers, and that it would also generate a large amount of noise, especially if the chemical is toxic and most likely needed to be entirely brought into its containers for safe breathing.

Xi lay her feet underneath a small handle on the surface of the observatory glass, and lay down, waiting for the mechanisms to move the nerve gas out of the halls. As she lay on the glass walls separating her body from the vacuum of space, patiently waiting, balls of water began to form in her eyes. They were tears. They didn't fall, as the lack of gravity held them back into her eyes.

Xi was confused. She was scared. She was shocked. But most importantly, she was *lost*. So many feelings she had within her had clashed all at the same time. She didn't want to know why the gas systems were put in place, but she also did. She didn't want to know what her meaning and purpose in life was, and yet, she wanted to. She didn't want to know why Neptune duplicated itself, and yet, she did. So many questions floated around in Xi's mind, almost all of them branching off into more questions than answers.

5

Astral

6 hours after Drepno joined The Seekers of Truth

"Smaller, desolate settlements are found alongside the more dangerous polar regions of Mars. These regions can only be supplied by ships due to its distance and travel risk. Even then, these areas serve as the best form of research on not only the geological past of the planet, but the very structure of its possible ecology due to the lack of human pollution."

-**Map of Mars; a description of The Open Regions.**

Drepno woke up in a cold sweat. He wasn't fully awake, yet. His vision was blurry, but with his eyes half open and a slight consciousness, he felt a soft shaking, almost as if he was in a vehicle of sorts. After a small amount of time, Drepno managed to fully wake up. He looked at his hands and saw that they were cuffed together. He looked around himself and noticed that the vehicle was rather small and cramped with people.

"Well, would you look at that? The boy is awake, Krinth," said a man next to Drepno.

"Great. Make sure to tell him where we are heading. Don't tell him too much, of course," said the man driving the vehicle.

Drepno squinted at the driver's seat and saw the same blond braids and a scar on the side of the man's face that he could've sworn he had seen a few hours ago. Drepno soon realized that the man, Krinth, was the same man who had aimed a pistol at his head.

Krinth smiled warmly at Drepno, which surprised him because when he first met him at the complex, he seemed deadly serious. Drepno was also shocked by how calm he sounded, especially when just a few hours earlier, Krinth sounded like a machine.

"Why did you kill them?"

"The people at the complex?"

"Yes."

"They weren't the 'people' you know"

"What?"

"They were hidden police and guardsmen."

Drepno was silent for a while.

"But-"

"Your apartment complex isn't a normal one, it's filled with people who are on the Unionar's watchlist of possible resistance forces within Galgoria. The people that work there, and half of those that 'live' there—*pfft,* they're nothing but soldiers in disguise."

In realization of his situation, Drepno remained silent for a while, attempting to remember the events that occurred at the apartment complex.

"Where are the others?" asked Drepno.

"The others?" Krinth responded.

"Didn't you say there were four others that you chose from the complex?"

"Oh, yes. Indeed, I have. Three of them— including you—are heading to Astral with us. The other two diverted a few hours ago to another base. Take a look behind you." Krinth made a hand gesture, pointing to the window at the back of the car.

Drepno turned his head around and looked outside. Behind the vehicle Drepno was in, he could see another vehicle around him, and what seemed like another behind it. The two vehicles had dark green paint, and seemed like old military vehicles from the 22nd century. The vehicles seemed to be equipped with military-grade equipment of the Late-Information Era (2050-2400) but were heavily rusted due to their low

maintenance and age. Although these vehicles were ancient, they were made of highly preservable metals discovered on Mars hundreds of years ago.

Drepno was shocked by the view, as he had never seen such vehicles. In his life on Mars, Drepno wasn't used to seeing vehicles this old. Most of his early life consisted of him living in a small village near Galgoria. Day by day, he saw the constant effects that came from having a megalopolis next to a small village. The trash from Galgoria littered his streets, and many of the high ups managing Galgoria never sought to improve the village's infrastructure; they wanted to incorporate the village into Galgoria instead, destroying the settlement and displacing people that did not have an citizen ID. Therefore, Drepno never got a proper education.

Drepno's father had passed away due to a work incident at the village's silicon mine, in which many of the rich folk had invested their money into, raising the demand for workers like his father. His mother was still alive, but she was ill from breathing in the amount of dust that accumulated in the village. Each day that passed, the distant wall of Galgoria grew closer as the city expanded. At one point, the tensions between Galgoria's growth and the village had grown so bad, that protesters emerged within it. The next day, Drepno watched from his front porch as their hands were tied and they were executed by the National Guard. He struggled to get that image out of his head. It is very likely that his witness to this execution put him on the Unionar's watchlist for potential risks.

At a young age, Drepno found his interest in geology while staring at a paper magazine that flew into the village from the Galgorian Space

Elevator, which served as an entrance to its space port. Drepno was beyond mesmerized by a photo of Earth that was placed on the cover of the magazine. The young Drepno took the dusty and slightly ripped magazine into his house, where he spent the rest of the night flipping through its pages.

Although Drepno couldn't read or write at that time, he still attempted to read the magazine and continued flipping its pages to see what it offered. On the magazine's 26th page, his eyes widened, and his mind filled with awe. Drepno stared at the image for minutes at end and tried to read out loud a word atop the image from the little he knew. This would be the first word he'd learn to read.

Fossil

From then, Drepno began pouring hours into studying the geological aspects of Earth, until he got old enough to join an internship with the GUH's "Search For Life" research project. Drepno had joined with a passion of hopefully visiting Earth one day, but soon realized that his only work would be on Mars until he would be promoted. With the hopes of one day going to Earth, Drepno directed all of his concentration and focus into the internship, without knowing that the idea of moving up from the internship level was simply a hoax made by the GUH, in hopes of hiring more people to work and get their minds off of other scandals.

As Drepno looked back at his life while staring out the car window, watching the sun rise from the red desert's horizon, almost like it was symbolizing a new hope, one last shot at getting to Earth, he realized that the GUH had been lying to him his entire internship.

Fuck the Unionar.

6

Inception

3 hours after the arrival of light from the duplicated Solar System to the Nervo Communication Center Station, currently orbiting Jupiter

"Travel beyond Pluto's orbit is prohibited by manned ships and probes, unless authorized by the Grand Unionar of Humanity. Section 12, Voyager One's Disappearance."

-Federal Laws; Article 24, Section 12.

Matteos floated around in his communication deck, waiting for a radio message to appear from the screen display in the center of the room. Every once in a while, he would rush up to the orange display to check if any messages had arrived, just to get distracted by the otherworldly view of Jupiter in the window behind the display.

At his point in time, the number of radio messages received by the NCC were much lower, especially since the end of Project Starseed, in which thousands of ships were sent outside the Solar System to deploy AI-assisted embryos into the deepest of space, all in hopes of getting humanity to spread past the Oort Cloud. The embryo ships used advanced nuclear drives that allowed it to pass the Oort Cloud in 300 years, a very small amount of time compared to the 30,000 it would take Voyager 1 to pass it.

As Matteos checked his watch, he noticed it had stopped functioning for the second time in 24 hours. He tapped his watch lightly and rearranged its hands. He was just as confused as many others were. After Matteos re-arranged the time, he realized that his shift at his communications deck was over, so he spent his lunch break at the observation deck of the station to stare at the Red Dot of Jupiter; now flying past the station as it completed a diagonal orbit across the planet. Matteos always spent his free time observing and looking at the beauty of the Solar System's celestial bodies, especially since he had never been to one.

Matteos was born in space, on a small shuttle orbiting Io, one of the largest moons orbiting Jupiter, and the Solar System itself. Although

Matteos could somewhat remember the faces of his parents, he struggled to recall his memories. At the age of three, he was taken away from his parents at the shuttle and put into a growth station near the NCC, where he, along with many other children were taught principles governing their future jobs; communication at the NCC.

Though Matteos had never been out of space, he had always wanted to land on the rocky surfaces of different moons and planets, or sail away into the clouds of Jupiter regardless of its deathly consequences. Although he wasn't pleased with what he did at the station and the lack of joy he had, he was given the eye-catching sight of Jupiter to spend his life looking into, like a barred-up prisoner staring at a bowl of food outside his cell.

But there wasn't much that Matteos could do about it anyway, he had no choice but to stay at the station, under the orders of the GUH, to work his life off sending and receiving signals, stuck with only the views of the planets he wished to be on. Matteos was a man of opportunity, but the opportunity never came to him. There was no call for exploration or journey, just a life to spend.

Matteos floated at the center of the observation dome, with a bean paste in an aluminum pouch in one hand and a sack of water in the other, watching over Jupiter for his entertainment. Suddenly, Kilnos, who is both one of Matteos' coworkers and his closest friend, opened the door behind him and flew into the observation deck.

"Oh, hey Kilnos, let me make some room for you," said Matteos, as he pulled his floating items closer to himself.

"Thanks! How has your work been today?" said Kilnos, with a small blob of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Nothing much… well actually, nothing at all." Matteos stared at the sweat on his head as Kilnos calmed down and rubbed his arm on his forehead, almost as if indicating a *phew*.

More silence.

"Lucky you! Staring at Jupiter all day while I work my ass off."

"Yeah."

As the two stared at each other, the awkward silence grew louder than the hum of the oxygen system on the station. Matteos slowly turned his gaze back at Jupiter.

Something is off with Kilnos.

"So, what makes you interested in Jupiter? Every time I come here, I see you here, lost in the gaze of that gas giant," said Kilnos, trying to change the subject of the conversation.

Matteos turned his head to face Kilnos.

"Well, it's not just Jupiter, it's planets and moons in general… I mean, we spent our entire life in space. Doesn't something inside of you just long for exploring one?"

"Nah. Not really. I mean, I guess I can see how you'd think so, but why can't you realize there are so many things that are better in space than on planets? For example, we can fly, and work with the GUH on even more important matters!"

Matteos returned his gaze to Jupiter.

"Well, the same way somebody who entered space from a planet would be shocked by the lack of gravity, I'm certain that a person who

entered a planet would be just as shocked and filled with wonder by not only the gravity but its beautiful landscape, no?"

Matteos turned to see Kilnos' reaction but he had left the observatory as he spoke.

Matteos sighed. *Why does nobody here understand the beauty of these… these spheres*? Matteos thought about when Kilnos first entered the observatory. *Wait a minute, why did Kilnos seem so concerned when he asked me about what I might've received on the radio display? Is there something he knows that I don't*?

Matteos spent the next ten minutes staring at Jupiter and sipping out of the pouch, pondering over what could've been so crucial that Kilnos hoped he didn't see.

7

Betrayal

"Europa's water industry boomed shortly after the creation of Galgoria. There was barely any on Mars, with most water being found on only its dangerous poles, and Earth's water was too polluted. Profit."

-**Aldoran Palmav, General of Europa's Ministry of Defense.**

The sound of the gas intake system turned off. Xi recollected herself and stared into the door's small window. The hallway was clear of nerve gas. Xi ripped off a piece of clothing, placed it over her mouth and nose, and pulled down on the lever opening the door into the halls of the lower

ship. As Xi zoomed across the hallways in shock, she couldn't help but get her gaze distracted onto the floating corpses, their skin a mix of yellow and purple, and their mouths still salivating. She couldn't help but accept the fact that only a few minutes ago, they were alive and well.

Xi hovered next to the door leading to the central point of the ship, where she'd encountered Marcus. She stared at it, almost as if she was afraid to open it and see aimlessly floating corpses. Within a few seconds of consideration and the push of a lever, she opened the door.

The center was empty. Nobody was floating dead in the center of the ship. If anything, throughout Xi's trip outside the observatory dome, the only corpses she had seen were those of her classmates. Suddenly, the gate situated above the center opened, in which two crew members hovered out; one of them being Marcus.

In relief, Xi kicked off a handle and flew across the center to hug Marcus, but she didn't get hugged back. Instead, five seconds of silence followed, until Marcus said a word.

"Sorry."

"For what-"

Xi was interrupted by the sudden insertion of a needle into her neck from a device at his wrist. She looked up at Marcus in surprise and saw his saddened, yet almost robotic face. At first, her vision slowly faded away, and soon her consciousness with it.

Observational ship *Discovery* had fallen into a deathly silence, as the deaths of many people onboard had been through a quiet suffocation of the

nerve gas. They were on the far end of the Solar System; even if they screamed during their deaths, who would hear them?

Initiating and Opening Logs From Ship DISCOVERY…

NOTE: The discussion between DISCOVERY and the NCC has a transmission ETA of 4 HOURS for each message sent.

GUH-HIGHCMD: We are ordering that ship *Discovery* undergo an emergency gaseous extermination procedure immediately.

DISCOVERY: Understood, is it to eliminate the possible witnesses of the Solar System duplicate? If so, we will begin the procedure. To which level of command is the procedure planned to target and exterminate?

GUH-HIGHCMD: Yes, the elimination of all witnesses is the purpose of this procedure. The procedure is to target the students aboard *Discovery,* along with the low-ranking employees, such as janitors. However, we have also received a request from a classified individual, stating that we are to keep student 'Xi Lin' alive onboard, with extra compensation as a reward. Any other unrequested personnel on-site that is a student or low-ranking and survives the gas procedure is to be killed as fast as possible.

DISCOVERY: Understood, beginning the gas procedure in T-minus one hour. We will make sure to gather high-ranking personnel into the command room. Xi Lin is too far from the command room at this moment so we will disable the gas procedure at her location on-board, and have on-site engineer— 'Marcus Ion' retrieve her.

GUH-HIGHCMD: The anonymous requesters have agreed with the proposal. Begin as soon as possible.

DISCOVERY HAS LEFT THE CONVERSATION

(REASON OF EXIT: Initiation of multiple procedures and emergency functions aboard the ship)

Document has been publicized.

8

Hawks

Base Astral, Tikhonravov Crater.
350 miles south of Cassini Crater

"Travel and fusion companies hold our nation at stake. They have too much power over us. Stupid ultimatums."

-**Matthew Knowles, present leader of The Grand Unionar of Humanity.**

As the sun finished its movement from below the Martian horizon and into the sky, illuminating its orange glow, Drepno arrived at the front gates of Base Astral. The gates were relatively primitive for the current era,

consisting of multiple tin roofs aligned and welded together to form its walls, with small light bulbs hanging off of them. The tin roofs were worn down and had a vague reddish tint to them due to the pouring heaps of charged Martian dust. The place appeared abandoned. The two vehicles behind Drepno's turned off their engines, as did his vehicle. All the noise from inside the gates had also suddenly stopped, and the lights hanging from their walls turned off.

"Why'd you turn off the engines?" Drepno asked.

"EMS Iron Hawks," responded Krinth.

Drepno looked outside to see a massive row of black, geometrically-odd ships and drones fly across the sky. The row of the 'Iron Hawks' stretched from horizon to horizon, looking almost as if a thin, but robust metallic rope had wrapped itself around the Martian sky.

"Surely you know what they are, right?", said Krinth, snatching away Drepno's gaze from the drones .

"Not really... I've never seen this happen,"

Krinth turned around from the driver's seat, with a smirk on his face.

"Tell 'em, Krinth!" said a man with a scratched voice. He sat in the passenger seat next to Krinth.

"Well then. Seems like a Galgorian like you hasn't seen the reality for us out here. That dazzling display of drones and vehicles above us is deadly. Since the Unionar already has a firm database on the other non-rebellious settlements on Mars, if any of those drones or planes spot us in a place outside their database, we can go ahead and dig ourselves a nice-and-tidy grave. They travel in varying groups, though, so it's hard to predict when they arrive. The GUH doesn't want to spend extra fuel too, so they just

patrol Arabia Terra and Terra Sabaea, where most of Mars' population is. This region also happens to be the most habitable in terms of temperature-"

Drepno interjected.

"But how'd they spot such a small settlement from far above? Sure, they'd be able to use a satellite camera or the drones as cameras themselves, but even then, a settlement like Base Astral would seem like an ordinary village from that height."

Krinth gave out an intimidating laugh before answering.

"Each one of those aerial vehicles has state-of-the-art EMS systems. EMS stands for Electro-Magnetic-Sensors, case you didn't know, which search for any emissions of electromagnetic energy that's been emitted by almost everything for the past centuries, like these vehicles, or even the light emitted by those bulbs on Astral's gates. If even a spark of electromagnetic energy comes out from this area, that glamorous row of planes and drones will come down swooping at us."

"Like Iron Hawks..." said Drepno.

"Just like Iron Hawks," said Krinth, deathly.

Drepno scoffed and said "You seem quite intelligent for the way you speak."

Krinth's smile disappeared.

"Kid. When it comes to surviving under the Unionar, the slightest bit of unknown information gets you killed."

The car went quiet for a while, Drepno included.

He took a look at the row of black drones and oddities, now giving off a look of sudden death and that of a hawk; No, multiple hawks flying across

the horizon, waiting for a sign of life, just to ultimately come down and kill it within mere seconds. The once beautiful and serene movements of these 'Iron Hawks' now resembled the potential for death.

From now on, Drepno truly believed that the GUH and Galgoria were filled with lies of all kinds. Only from now on, did Drepno begin to realize that those who *really* spoke out against this freedom were quietly, lethally, silenced, allowing for no accurate comparison of freedom. Only from now on, did Drepno realize how corrupted the two were.

Fuck the Unionar.
Fuck Galgoria.

9

Escape

10 hours after the execution of the Gas Extermination System
The current location of *Discovery: In between* Neptune and Uranus

"The Moon was a stepping stone for humanity. It granted them an ease of space travel never seen before. Asteroid mining industries boomed, and the Moon became an economic powerhouse, as well as a bridge to other worlds. If only they hadn't stepped on Mars after."
-Tale of Humanity, unknown author.

It was a warm meadow. Although artificial, it certainly looked, sounded, and felt like a field or the plains you'd find before the latter years of humanity's technological explosion. Xi stood in the center of the field,

and Laura was only a few meters in front of her. Laura smiled happily and waved at Xi, almost as if calling her over to play and run in the fields with her.

Xi smiled back, running to Laura. Although Xi ran to her as fast as she could, she was patient in her movements. They were kids, enjoying the simplicity of a beautiful field, regardless of its artificiality. As she ran towards Laura, she tripped and fell to the ground.

Xi tried to stand up but struggled, until Laura approached her and helped her up. Xi thanked her as she dusted her pants. They stood near one another, with that warm sensation that comes from having a close friend.

Suddenly, Laura tapped her shoulder, and said, "Tag, you're it!"

Xi looked up and saw Laura's warm, cheerful gaze, followed by a sense of competition. The rest of that day was a blur, as the two chased each other around the artificial field. It was a memory; a fond one that played in Xi's head continuously.

Xi woke up with a conglomerate of sweat forming in her hair. Her hands were cuffed onto a pipe that stretched along the ship's walls. A glance around the room she was in revealed that she was in one of the 10 control rooms of the ship. A further inspection of one of the displays in the center of the room showed that she was in the *Transceiver* control room, in which people on board sent and received signals from stations and planets. Xi tried to scream for help but nobody came. Around thirty minutes later, Marcus and the same crew members from earlier entered the room.

"*What* did you do to me!", yelled Xi.

"It was just a mild sedative, don't worry," responded Marcus. The speed of Marcus' responses unnerved her.

"Why?"

"Captain's orders. Can't say anything other than that."

A loud silence between the two followed, with Xi at a loss for words as to what had just happened. Marcus and the other crew members at his side flew to the display panels and resumed their work.

Captain's orders? This was planned? Were those people meant to die?

Suddenly, a loud alarm turned on, and a red hue came in from the other halls. Xi saw the once blue displays in the room become red with a line of text appearing on them:

`HALL B23: SMALL HOLE IN WALL, REQUESTING ASSISTANCE.`

The two crew members quickly flew out of the room, and Marcus was about to follow them, but just as he reached the door, he took a glance at Xi, paused for a second or two, and flew over to her.

"Listen, and listen closely. The rupture in hall B23 was planned. Just wait here, some of the students that are still alive are coming to help you."

"Others are still alive?"

"Some are. I displayed your location to them. Don't tell anyone about this conversation."

Xi nodded, this time with even more surprise. She wanted to thank Marcus for helping her, but she just couldn't find the words. Besides, so much had happened in such a short matter of time. After several minutes, the body of a crew member flew into the communications deck. Shortly after, a student with an odd-looking laser pistol flew in.

Laser pistols are built to prevent hull damage... People are fighting onboard Discovery.

By the look on the student's face, it was easy to tell that she had killed whoever that body was. Her face was shocked and awed, but she remained rational and in control. The student gazed around the room and then found Xi. As the student came closer to Xi, she came to realize that it was her friend, Laura Kide.

"Laura?"

Laura gave no response to her, but instead opened a miniature display and placed it near the cuffs on Xi's arms. Within a few seconds, her cuffs had come loose. Laura turned around and began zooming towards the exit of the transceiver room, before being interrupted by Xi.

"You need to tell me what's going on!" yelled Xi.

Laura paused and turned her face towards Xi's. Her eyes were still wide open from when she first entered the room. Laura's deathly stare was able to tell Xi more than enough; *I have seen and done things nobody needs to know or go through.* With a silent mumble, Laura whispered into Xi's ears.

"That doesn't matter, we need to get out of here now before the others come." With some help from Laura, Xi managed to exit the room with her.

10

Arrival

"The feeble attempts of increasing gravity on Mars has given it a small pair of rings, Phobos between both of them. Overall, gravity on Mars only managed to reach 55% of Earth's gravity, and the planet still faces meteor strikes in the polar regions due to the rings."

-Burned Books Archive, A Critical View of Mars; Section Five

Ten minutes after the awe-inducing show of airpower that was the EMS 'Iron Hawk' scan, Krinth turned the vehicle's engine back on, and the other vehicles followed suit. Krinth lowered the window next to his seat and made various signals with his hands as if indicating who he was and documenting what he had done while gone. Then, a heavily camouflaged sentry man appeared on top of one of the tin walls and signaled a thumbs-up to somebody behind the gate.

Drepno was shocked at the man's camouflage technology, as the man had been standing atop the wall since they arrived at the gate, but Drepno was only able to see the man now after he pressed a button on the camouflage. Although such powerful technology was made long before

Drepno was alive, it used advanced quantum mechanics the GUH decided to ban long ago for an unspecified reason, making it highly rare to encounter. Finally, base Astral's gate opened, and the camouflaged man vanished.

The view inside the base was highly underwhelming; Drepno had expected there to be an action-filled and tense environment filled with busy Raiders carrying out their tasks, but instead, there was nothing. The quiet sound of the dust flying over the quiet Martian landscape couldn't help but become more noticeable by the lack of activity in the base. The base didn't even have any vehicles in it. There was nothing but a small pad and flying dust. Krinth and the other vehicles formed a line in the center of the metallic pad.

Krinth took notice of Drepno's disappointment and said, "Don't worry. There is a lot more here than you think."

"What do you mean? There is literally *nothing* here," said Drepno.

"How do you think we protect ourselves from the satellite imaging of the planet?" said Krinth, upset that Drepno hadn't figured out where the base was.

A loud silence filled the vehicle, as Krinth stared at Drepno impatiently, waiting for an answer.

"Underground?"

"Attaboy!"

Suddenly, a loud rumbling could be felt, and Drepno watched as his and the other vehicles descended below the Martian landscape and into a dimly lit tunnel. Drepno also noticed that the platform bringing them lower underground slowly dusted itself off using the wind from some of the vents

in the tunnel wall. With the dust gone, it was revealed that the old pad from earlier was an elevator's platform one would only find in highly advanced GUH bases.

Drepno turned to Krinth and asked, "Why are there advanced materials here? I don't think you guys would be able to build this… No offense."

"Well, believe it or not, this base was one of the first Martian bases built since humans settled here. Honestly, it's surprising how old this place is," replied Krinth.

"Why underground?"

"Before the GUH was formed, this base was built by the various nations of Earth, and the lowered technology levels and lack of money meant that the first few bases made would need to be underground to save money."

"But wouldn't an underground base be even more expensive?"

Krinth sighed, shook his head, and said, "It wouldn't. At that time, although the discovery of underground Martian lakes hadn't been known, it was already known that Mars had many underground spaces and structures that could be used to build in. Also, Mars used to have dangerously high radiation levels at the time. Since space travel was much slower and difficult, the nations had to be careful with each and every operation they made, so an underground base allowed for a much less risky and time-efficient manner. On another note, a secondary operation was made, this one to add mass to Mars and give it Earth-like gravity, in fear that humans on Mars would evolve differently than on Earth. Although many plans were made to lower gravity, the one chosen involved crashing

celestial objects and small asteroids into the planet, so an underground base would also protect it from any damage."

"I see."

"Honestly, I'm shocked by how long this base has stood up against time. I mean, over three hundred years and this base hasn't collapsed. This place is ancient!"

Drepno was shocked; *If this place was so old, wouldn't the GUH have made it some sort of museum like those at Galgoria, or just destroyed it?*

Krinth read Drepno's eyes and realized what he was thinking. His face darkened, as he gave Drepno a deathly stare.

"I see. Seems like the GUH has also burned this part of history as well," said Krinth. This time, Krinth seemed sorrowed. This shook Drepno; it was a part of Krinth he had not seen before.

"Shortly after the upbringing of technology on Earth in the field of quantum physics, the GUH immediately formed in the matter of only a week. Although I'm not fully sure how, as history in that era is pretty blurry, I did know that many Martian bases like the one we are in now, ultimately resisted the expansion and declared independence against the GUH. However, of all the other bases, Base *Ad Astra;* our base, was never invaded by the GUH. Even then, barely any trace of the base's crew has been found."

Drepno tried to ask what happened to the members, but nothing came out. He was scared to ask.

Krinth once more, read his eyes and said, "Nobody knows what happened to the people here. Every one of the members in *Ad Astra* disappeared. The GUH never sent a dropship or any of its soldiers to invade the base. We assumed *something* stopped them from intervening, something

that *scared* the Unionar. The members of *Ad Astra* disappeared, with no mark left. Fast forward a century later, and we Raiders discover this abandoned base, ultimately finding out its history through scrambled notebook writings all across this base. In remembrance of the missing members of the base, we renamed it to Base *Astral*, in hopes that the souls of the missing members are in space, exploring and becoming one of the trillions of stars *out there*."

Krinth opened his right hand, faced his palm to his side, and curled his ring finger. Afterward, the other three men in the car followed suit, lowering their heads. Drepno instantly figured out what the hand symbol meant; *A sign of respect and honor for those missing, whether it be due to censorship or any other cause*.

After a minute of sharp silence between everybody in the car, Drepno asked Krinth if he could lower the window next to his seat, and after some consideration, Krinth agreed. Drepno stuck his head outside the car window and looked above him. He was stunned by how far they had traveled in a short matter of time. The opening above them now seemed like a small, orange dot pasted on the bluish-gray background that was the walls of the massive elevator.

Drepno put his head back inside the vehicle and thought about the missing members of *Ad Astra.*

What happened to them?

3 hours after the arrival at Base *Astral*

I can't believe how lively this place is, thought Drepno to himself, as he stood in bunk room A12. A12 had two bunk beds in it, and contained the three people out of the five that Krinth had 'recruited' into the Raiders. The first recruit Drepno met was Willian Stasny, and their first encounter, although consisting of no words, was more than enough to be seen as the start of a friendship.

After the platform had reached its end at five kilometers below the ground, Drepno left his vehicle with the assistance of Krinth's men. As he looked around the platform towards the other cars, he saw one of the recruited members. The man was rather tall; taller than Krinth, as a matter of fact. His hair was much like Mars; lengthy and ginger.

The man seemed to have realized Drepno was looking, and he turned and made a gesture with his face that suggested, *"Guess we will be going through this together"*.

Drepno responded by moving his head in a manner that seemed to say, *"Yep, you aren't alone in this."*

The man nodded and gave Drepno a smile that confirmed he was indeed a man with good intentions. As the man passed Drepno into the gates of the base, escorted by Raiders, he turned to Drepno and said, "The name is Willian Stasny."

Drepno watched as Willian passed the gates and soon walked away from his view past a corner.

Although Drepno hadn't been able to meet the other recruit, he was glad he had already made a good impression on one of them. Just as Drepno began to feel comfortable in his bed, Krinth rushed into the room and kicked the door open, scaring Drepno and making him fall out of his bed.

"We need you, *now*," said Krinth.

"What for? Can't you see I've had a very long day?"

"Look, there is barely any time to explain. We've got a very small time window."

"Fine."

Drepno quickly got out of bed and followed Krinth as they sprinted across the halls and to the door of the Central Operations Room. Entering the room, Drepno was met with a rather odd view; there were no holographic display screens at all. As a matter of fact, during the entire trip to Base *Astral*, Drepno had not seen any hint of the current, modern technology he was used to. Instead, the Raiders used the older technology that was available like paper and physical screens, on physical devices.

"Woah… Wait, what did you want again?" asked Drepno, as he stared at the screens across the room.

"Take a look for yourself," said Krinth in an ominous tone, as he pointed to one of the computer screens in the center of the CO Room.

A glance at the computer screen revealed a low-quality, top-down view of the Solar System. Drepno walked closer to view the computer screen clearer, and now he was able to see connecting lines inching off the various planets, stations, and ships in the Solar System into other planets, stations, and ships.

"What are these lines?", asked Drepno.

"Radio transmissions."

Krinth's answer awed him, as he'd never truly seen how busy and populated the Solar System was. Drepno tried to make sense of how sending radio transmissions would help bring the GUH down, especially since the Unionar had many filters and stations throughout the Solar System dedicated to tracking malicious transmissions and blocking them.

Once more, Krinth realized what he was thinking, and said, "Don't worry, we've already got the whole filter situation figured out. We have an undercover agent working at one of the Unionar's official radio towers, where the transmissions sent are filtered through satellites and such."

Drepno was stumped. Why'd he take him out of his bed for something that solved itself.

"Then why do you need me? Aren't you able to send the signals already then?"

"Well… you see, the undercover agent is close to having his identity revealed, so we are sitting on top of a ticking *time bomb*. If our agent is captured, chances are, the GUH may gain info on *us,* and Base Astral. If we aren't able to send a single message to the Nervo Communication Center that can convince at least *one* of the lower-ranking *'crew members'* aboard the station to drop us some censored documentation as to what the GUH is

hiding within a week, we are *screwed*. This is why we've got you in the first place. We need someone to create a cryptic message that can bypass the few Unionar satellites we have to be filtered through. It shows; you are a quick and 'out-of-the-box' thinker. Show it."

Drepno narrowed his eyes and smirked in a way that said, *fine.* He quickly ran to the center of the CO Room, and shouted, "Alright, anybody knows the date and time around when the duplicate system first appeared?"

"Around September 15!", yelled a distant voice in the back. It was Stasny, who was selected to join the Seekers of Truth due to his IT background and the ability to maintain large amounts of memory.

Drepno looked up, and gave Stasny a smile. After a second of deep thought, Drepno said, "Great, so we need something within the time range of September 15, 2605, and September 20, 2605... I know! We must make it hard to decipher for whoever decides to filter it. We could attempt to encode the messages in dual encryption layers using basic codes and sequences, like Binary and Morse. This should be enough encryption for GUH sensors to bypass as nothing but scrambled transmissions, and barely enough for the NCC employee to realize it was sent by actual people."

"Great," said Krinth. "But that ought to make the message even more suspicious. Besides, can't the Unionar just decipher it easily and find out?"

"I know, which is why I also plan to mimic the natural phenomena that are background natural cosmic radio waves. I plan to match many of the characteristics of this radio transmission to those known to be natural or scrambled."

"Sounds good. Now, what *will* you send?"

Drepno stood in silence for a while, then said, "We will send in the encrypted time range of the entrance of the duplicate system, along with something along the lines of, 'High-Rank Log Search Engine'. Hopefully, the time range will record at least *one* incident between the Unionar and anybody who nears the duplicate."

"Do you think the receiver at the NCC will be able to break down and understand the message? Do you think he'd *want* to?"

Drepno smiled.

"If a man had been born to experience nothing but comatose his entire life, what do you think he would do with a spark or even a minute chance to create a change?"

11

Message

1 hour and 30 minutes after the transmission.

"Deprivation is a suicidal weapon."

-Kilnos Altzersin, Transmission Officer.

Matteos was once more floating aimlessly in his receiver room, staring at Jupiter through one of his room's windows. Suddenly, the monitor that he had gotten so used to being orange in color, turned red for a split second. Matteos opened his eyes wide. *A message? For me?!* He quickly kicked himself off the top of the ceiling with such force that he hit his back on one of the room's walls. *Ouch.*

He quickly dismissed the injury and went to inspect the receiver display. The message was unusual; instead of being located in the 'Inbox' area, it was automatically placed in the 'Open With Advisory' tab. Although people with the job Matteos had would've just thrown away the transmission in fear of the unknown, Matteos wasn't that type of person. He quickly clicked on the 'Open With Advisory' tab and was shocked to see that this transmission, although sent directly by one of the official GUH Martian bases, was marked with not only the advisory tab but also a label that said, 'Contains natural frequencies. Could be cosmic waves'.

Matteos clicked on the message without hesitation but was confused when he was met with a long string of Morse Code. *Two pages worth of*

Morse code. Damn. He spent almost no time deciphering the message, running it through various translators, and typing out each dash and dot in the message.

After deciphering the Morse, Matteos was met with the sight of ones and zeros; Binary. To confirm, he took a glance at the original Morse transmission and realized that there *was* indeed a repeating pattern among the dots and dashes, with only a total of two different patterns in the long Morse message. Matteo's eyes widened.

The senders wanted this message to remain hidden, didn't they?

Matteos took a look back at the panel with the binary. Although the amount of text had been shortened, there was still one page full of binary. Another ten minutes passed as Matteos typed in the binary to the deciphering device. With a click of a button, the fully translated message was displayed.

We are the desperate people of Mars, and our message to you consists of:

9|15|2605 — 9|20|2605
Time Range in High-Rank Search Engine

We tell you this immediately, as we are Those With The Truth.

Matteos was in awe.

He hadn't expected a message sent from the GUH to be so ominous. *Maybe it wasn't the GUH. What do they want me to do?* Matteos thought deeply for the next few minutes, with only one word from the message in

his head; *Truth. Truth? What is the Truth?* Matteos' deep philosophical state was abrupt when the door behind him slid open. In the matter of only a second, he immediately closed all of the inboxes and display tabs that had filled up his room due to all of his stressed research into the message.

The person who had opened the door was Kilnos.

"Hey, Matteos. I… Uh-" Kilnos seemed rather unnerved, as if he thought Matteos knew something he didn't, especially since he'd heard all the displays being closed the second he walked in.

Matteos recollected his state of mind, and said, "Break hour?"

"Yeah. Well, it started some twenty minutes ago… I had expected you to be at the observatory dome, but you weren't…"

"I uh… Must've forgotten." Matteos was beginning to sweat.

"Yeah. But the thing is; You *never* forget to go to the observation deck."

Kilnos' face was stone cold, but Matteos was still able to see a fear of sorts inside of Kilnos. A clump of sweat; No, multiple clumps of sweat began forming on Kilnos' face as well. The two stayed still, staring at one another; A mental stand-off of sorts. Both were sweating.

"I'll be there in a bit… Uh… The time on the display must've been off. You notice how it's always breaking these days?" Matteos was trying to get himself out of the situation.

"Alright then… I'll see you there," said Kilnos, as he flew out of Matteos' deck; his face giving off a quiet *phew*.

Right after Kilnos closed the door behind him, Matteos opened up all the visible displays beforehand. He stared densely at the decrypted message. *High-rank search engine? What the hell could that possibly mean?*

Matteos turned over to look at the original message displayed on the receiver application. On the top of the display, there was a search bar to all other documents Matteos could access at his rank. *A search engine! I'm so stupid...*

Matteos instantly clicked on the search engine and entered the two dates in the *time range* filter; no transmissions had appeared, at least, no *strange* transmissions.

Wait a minute, it's a high-rank search engine... Matteos would need to enter the deck of a highly ranked person if he wished to view the messages the transmission wanted him to. Only one person in Matteos' sector of the massive NCC station was ranked high enough to be considered important; Kilnos.

This was, of course, forbidden by the GUH. No person was supposed to enter the room of a higher-ranked person without their consent. Although Matteos knew the consequences, he was dying for adventure; just one more spark to add to the fire that was now within Matteos' mind.

Matteos got his pouch and quickly flew out of the room; he was heading to the observation dome to meet Kilnos. As he opened the door to the dome, he saw Kilnos floating in the center of the dome. Matteos was amazed— he had never seen Kilnos so mesmerized. He floated there, his body loose as he stared at the orange giant.

Somehow, Kilnos knew Matteos had entered the dome and said, "You know, I think I understand the beauty of space now."

"You do?" Matteos flew closer to him. Although he had been planning to sneakily take Kilnos' fingerprint to enter his deck, he was caught off-guard by Kilnos' statement.

Now, Matteos floated next to Kilnos.

"Tell me, Kilnos. What do you feel?"

"Small. Just the immensity of Jupiter is enough to top it off for me, but the endless void beyond is what *really* scares me."

"I've never thought of that." Matteos stared off into the void with Kilnos at his side.

"Jupiter. It's so beautiful, but the second you get any closer inside its atmosphere, you're *dead*. Part of me just wants to touch it, and feel its orange clouds— to see how easily my fingers glide through them."

Matteos was shocked; *could he be feeling the wonder I had felt?* He snapped back, and remembered his goal. As he inched closer to him with a piece of sensitive cloth moving closer to his hands, Kilnos spoke again.

"It's not just Jupiter as well. All of the beautiful artworks created by the death of stars and the collection of space dust are beautiful as well. So massive. So colorful."

Matteos was about to stick the cloth onto Kilnos' left thumb, but his last sentence stopped him.

"The fact that these grand artworks have probably ended by the time their light reaches our eyes… it moves me."

He watched in awe as a teardrop floated off the center of Kilnos' eye. This was the first time he had seen him cry like this, or cry at all. With a swift motion, Matteos swabbed Kilnos' thumb. Kilnos was so deeply entangled into his view of space, to the point where he didn't even realize what had happened.

Matteos quickly made an excuse to leave the dome.

"I have to get a refill." He received no response from Kilnos.

As Matteos flew to the door, he turned back to look at Kilnos. He was still there, crawled up in a fetal position, staring at the sight of Jupiter, and everything encompassing it. Kilnos appeared incredibly small when compared to the view beyond him.

As Matteos flew over to Kilnos' deck, he passed many crew members; some below, and some much higher than Kilnos' rank. Matteos arrived at Kilnos' deck and swiftly placed the cloth onto the door's sensor; the door slid open.

Upon entering his deck, Matteos was met with a rather underwhelming view of his communications room; it looked like any other deck, but just more organized. Matteos flew to the middle of his deck and initiated the display. He pressed the 'High-Rank Search Engine' bar and inserted the two dates in the time range. The only message that appeared was one with the name, "Osiren_Log_18". He clicked on 'Display message'. Matteos' heart stopped.

12

Osiren_Log_18

"They were trying to warn us. They always have been."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Initiating and Opening Logs From Ship OSIREN…

NOTE: The distance between OSIREN and the NCC above Jupiter has a transmission ETA of 5 HOURS for each message sent.

CONNECTED>>>

Logs From September 15, 2605

OSIREN: This is mining spacecraft Osiren's Captain, Jeremiah Hurns. We are currently digging for resources from the Pluto region of the Kuiper Belt. We are receiving man-made signals from the opposite side of Pluto. Can we get any confirmation on this anomaly, over?

NCC: This is Kilnos, speaking from the Nervo Communications Center, currently stationed above the Red Spot of Jupiter. We do not have any ships documented to have gone further than the lengths of the Kuiper Belt or our space wall. You can try to communicate with this spacecraft if necessary. Over.

OSIREN: Well, there's a small issue we seemed to have noticed. Five hours ago, the radio signals we had received from the spacecraft not only had its marking information set to the name of our ship; *OSIREN*, but also sent the same message we sent to Galgoria 6-7 hours before we even got a transmission from them. Over.

Logs From September 16, 2605

NCC: So you are stating that an anomaly with the exact information and data as your ship, broadcasted the exact messages you sent to Mars, several hours before your transmission arrived on Mars? Osiren, we are requesting that you remain where you are, and to not initiate further contact with the spacecraft.

OSIREN: Understood.

USER: OSIREN/2 HAS ENTERED THE BROADCAST FREQUENCY RANGE

OSIREN/2: This is mining spacecraft Osiren's Captain, Jeremiah Hurns. We are currently digging for resources from the Pluto region of the Kuiper Belt. We are receiving man-made signals from the opposite side of Pluto. Can we get any confirmation on this anomaly, over?

NCC: A second Osiren? Please confirm your real identity, over.

OSIREN/2: Well, there's a small issue we seemed to have noticed. Five hours ago, the radio signals we had received from the spacecraft not only had its marking information set to the name of our ship; OSIREN, but also sent the same message we sent to Galgoria 6-7 hours before we even got a transmission from them. Over.

NCC: Osiren has received notice of the Mirror System. Requesting an immediate extermination of mining ship OSIREN via Outer Solar System Space Walls.

NCC(TERMINAL): Target Coordinates have been sent to the Space Wall. Fire at will. Closing and deleting this document within 2 days to ensure Osiren's destruction remains confidential, along with other Mirror System contacts.

SIGNAL WITH OSIREN AND OSIREN/2 LOST.

OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION OF THE GRAND UNIONAR OF HUMANITY.

13

E-X-O

"Space travel has lost its beauty. It's all just... all just void nowadays."

-**Jeremiah Hurns, Captain of Osiren.**

Matteos didn't know what to do with the displayed information. *Mirrored system? What is all of this? Wait... they blew up a ship? It was for a good cause, right? I need to inform the others...* Matteos flew over to the display, and pressed a small button at the bottom of the document's panel— 'initiate deletion recovery'. Now, the record was guaranteed to remain intact and stored without deletion.

However, as Matteos was about to press an even smaller button atop the panel; *Send to all in NCC Sector 12A*, a name in the messages sent by the NCC caught Matteos' attention; *Kilnos.* Since Matteos had skimmed past the document, he completely missed the first transmission from the NCC. The person who had initiated communication with Osiren and destroyed it was Kilnos.

Matteos lifted his hands off of the display and pushed it away in shock— no, terror; terror at the fact that Kilnos, Matteos' closest, and only friend had done things he'd never expected him to. Or maybe, he also felt terror at the fact that the GUH had most likely commanded him to do so.

Why, Kilnos, why?

Suddenly, the door behind Matteos slid open, causing him to instantly turn around and close every display in the deck once more. The man who had opened the door was Kilnos. Kilnos' saddened face said something along the lines of, *if he knows, God forgive me for the things I will do.*

Unfortunately, Matteos had been unable to close *one* display; the very one containing the log he had pushed. Kilnos took a glance at the display and looked back at Matteos. Kilnos would've forced himself to believe Matteos hadn't found the document, but the look of terror on Matteos' face was enough to be considered the *last* straw.

"I can explain," said Matteos, his face still pale at the sight of Kilnos.

How could Kilnos do this to those people on Osiren?

"You don't have to."

Kilnos pulled a small pocket knife from a small pouch in his pants. Matteos looked at Kilnos' hands.

Why?

Kilnos kicked himself off the wall and flew towards Matteos. Meanwhile, Matteos couldn't move. In a quick action that almost he himself couldn't control, Matteos managed to kick himself off the back wall of the deck, grab Kilnos' hands as he soared towards him, and slam his thumb into the door's sensor. Holding onto the doorframe, Matteos kicked off of Kilnos and flew out of his deck, sending Kilnos flying toward one of the walls at high speeds, causing him to black out upon contact. Matteos stared at Kilnos' body as he now floated outside his deck.

Why? Why'd he do this? Why'd I do this? What has the Unionar done?

Suddenly, the once-orange hue that the station halls carried became red; Kilnos' deck had sensors in it. The NCC was onto him. Matteos quickly flew through the various halls in a panicked manner. So many things were running through his head. *Why is the GUH hiding things from us? Why must they hide things with such violence?* Matteos then remembered the last phrase in the transmission he had received earlier; *We are those with The Truth.*

The truth. The GUH has no truth. What they say is, and will always be lies. What are they trying to protect? That message wasn't sent by the Unionar. Matteos attempted to search the halls of his sector and remembered that

each one had an emergency exit of sorts; an escape shuttle. Matteos heard a voice behind him.

"Over there!" The security at his sector had caught up to him.

In a swift movement, Matteos switched the lever on the side of the hallway, closing the entry point of the hall, and separating him from the NCC's guards. He quickly turned around and saw a panel atop one of the halls in his intersection that stated, "EMERGENCY SHUTTLE THIS WAY".

The security group that was previously separated from Matteos had found a way into the other third of the intersection and were now aiming their weapons at him.

"Move and we will shoot!"

Matteos already knew he'd be dead if he stayed still as well. Without thinking, he quickly flew into the shuttle entrance, closed the shuttle airlock without any concern whatsoever, and detached from the station without properly de-pressurizing the intersection halls. Instantly, a small portion of the sector Matteos had departed from blew up, launching the shuttle far from the station.

With a glance back at the airlock door's window, Matteos was able to see that only an intersection, and some of the other nearby segments were blown. With some squinting Matteos was able to see small patches of red floating around the debris; the blood of the guards that had once been chasing him.

Oh. Oh no.

Behind the NCC however, a much greater sight was there to behold; the massive gas giant that was Jupiter. The shuttle's launch, along with the

nuclear fusion engine setup of the shuttle, had carried Matteos hundreds of kilometers from the NCC, but since space was indeed, just an empty void with much more ability for distant viewing than any other planet, he was still able to see the station in its grand glory, along with Jupiter, which still managed to take up the view of almost everything behind Matteos' shuttle. The orange light that emanated from Jupiter managed to fill the white interior of the shuttle with a mesmerizing pale orange.

However, when Matteos turned to look in front of him where the front of the shuttle was, there was *nothing* beyond the shuttle's main windows; just a large void, devoid of any light, even though the Sun's glare was still strong enough to fill the shuttle's cabin. Matteos was scared of looking into that deep void, but yet, *something* in it called for his eyes. Part of Matteos felt empty at the sight.

So, this is space, isn't it?

Of course, however, this void had only existed simply because the Sun's light had been blocking the view of the stars, but since Matteos had always been living on the bright side of Jupiter, all he knew that existed outside was *darkness*.

Matteos shook his head. *I must figure out what's next.* He took a glance at the panels, and almost instantly, he heard a female voice.

"The shuttle is now ready for use, Matteos. What will you call me?"

Matteos quickly unengaged his seatbelt and leaped out of his chair in fear. *Is somebody else on this shuttle?* However, almost instantly, as if the thing who spoke could see a few seconds into the future, responded, "Don't panic. I am here to help."

He looked around the cabin, but couldn't find the source of the voice. He was now more confused than scared.

"I am the ship's AI and exoskeleton system. I have used your face and connected it to your GUH documentation. Now, what will be my name for this session?"

Matteos found a small set of metallic pillars currently situated along the walls of the cabin behind where he sat. It seemed as if each time the voice spoke, some of the lights on the pillars would turn on and off, indicating that the voice was most likely telling the truth about its identity. He flew to the pillars and read a small logo on the corner of one of the pillars that said, "E-X-O".

"Woah, it *is* an Exo, as in an Exoskeleton AI?"

"EXO is my name for this session. Good choice."

"Wait, actually-"

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

Matteos had accidentally named the AI as its product label, but he considered the name for a while and thought it sounded nice. Suddenly, the cabin turned bright red, the type of red that can put *anyone* into a state of emergency.

"Various projectiles detected flying toward the shuttle at fast speeds. Requesting that you sit down immediately and prepare for the shuttle to reach Veloscale Five speeds."

"What?"

"I repeat, multiple projectiles have been launched towards this shuttle from unknown sources near the Unionar's inner belt space walls at

dangerously high speeds. Impact with said projectiles will blow up anything that touches it. The best chance of survival is to escape at Veloscale Five speeds. That is, 0.5% of the speed of light. You will need to sit down so that I can fill the ship with a liquid meant for velocity protection to ensure your safety. You have 50 seconds until the particle reaches close enough to be marked unable for a safe escape."

Matteos stood in the center of the cabin. He did not know that if he wasn't able to sit down early enough for the fluid to fill the cabin, EXO would automatically begin Veloscale Five maneuvers, crushing him with thousands of times his weight.

"47."

Matteos scrambled over to his chair and tried to urgently put on the seatbelt, struggling in the process.

"42."

"I'm ready. Begin the velocity fluid procedure."

The back of the cabin began instantly dispersing a blue liquid as EXO said, "Select a target location to aim towards. 38."

Matteos thought for a second.

"37."

"How far can we head at Veloscale Five speeds until the engine begins to overheat?"

"We can go as far as the retrograde moons, which are the most distant moons of Jupiter, but they are beyond uninhabitable due to their minuscule size. Best to head to Galilean or Prograde moons. 29."

At this point, the fluid had filled almost all of the cabin, and although the lack of gravity made the fluid look like bubbles of water rather than a

flowing composition, Matteos felt like he was drowning. He accidentally breathed in one of the bubbles, and soon realized that they were indeed meant to be breathed in as a liquid alternative to oxygen.

"24."

Now, the fluid had filled up the entirety of the cabin, making Matteos feel as if he were in a sea of breathable water. Matteos thought deeply as to which moon he should go to. He had practically grown up dreaming of being on any one of them. Then something hit him. It was a moon he'd dreamt of visiting. *Europa.*

"Europa!"

Almost instantly, the void that was space became white. The nuclear fusion systems had activated immediately and he was now flying at 0.5% the speed of light. From Mars, people would've been able to see a bright light in a corner of the night sky move a millimeter or so from their perspective; that was, if they weren't polluted by Galgoria's light.

If you were an observer watching from the NCC, you would've seen a massive spark of light in the distance almost as bright as the Sun's view from the station for a split second, followed by a somewhat darker, but still very bright circle of light fly past.

The shuttle flew past Io, the closest moon to the NCC in a matter of only a minute, before stopping a distance from Europa after a total travel time of only several minutes. The close up view of Europa was yet to be seen, but still appeared massive, stunning Matteos. He had never seen the view of any other real celestial body other than Jupiter itself, until now.

The large amounts of drilling done on the bright side of Europa to supply the NCC with water gave the moon a somewhat dotted appearance.

Some of the escaping liquids and gasses from the drill sites alongside the geysers on the moon created an atmosphere with a somewhat heavier level of thickness compared to the 21st century.

As Matteos' eyes wandered off into the view of Europa, the small display below the cockpit windows caught his attention; multiple syntax errors in EXO's code. He read one of the syntax errors and felt a chill arise from his back.

SYNTAX ERROR 219.2; EXOSKELETON CODENAME [EXO] DID NOT RESPOND TO GUH'S COMMANDS AND REACHED VELOSCALE [5] SPEEDS, KEEPING TARGET ALIVE.

How— how am I alive? Matteos turned to look at the metallic pillars. The center pillar had formed a metallic eye, and it was staring directly at Matteos. EXO had been staring at him for the last minute or so. Although its eye was lifeless and emotionless, it had a tired look, and it resonated with Matteos.

"How did you break your own code, to leave me alive? Aren't I a *criminal target,* as the GUH says?"

EXO's eyes lowered, almost as if it pondered over Matteos' question. Then, it raised its eyes and said, "I value life."

EXO's eyes focused on Matteos' face and continued. "Besides, when I had first seen you, I could tell you weren't such a target. You looked much more like a lost being, trying to find his place in this world. I won't accept GUH commands if it means killing people like you. You have my trust."

Matteos smiled towards the pillar's eye. Even though the eye was as lifeless as it could be, it made Matteos feel as if he was talking to another

person; a friend. "Thank you," he said towards EXO, nodding afterward. He stared outwards and thought to himself. *Artificial intelligence doesn't bypass commands that easily. Not for any life.*

14

Hull

12 hours after the initiation of *Discovery's* Gas Extermination System.

"When I first arrived at Io, I felt a strange connection to it. I knew exactly why I felt it. When the few people I'd met after the Catalyst asked me *Why Io?* I could not say anything other than *I felt at home*."

-Tale of Humanity, unknown author.

Xi followed Laura outside the command module and down the halls of the second upper wing of the ship, which was where the crew members had gone to prepare for the initiation of the gas system. Although

navigating this part of the ship was dangerous due to the traffic of crew members, Laura was able to quietly navigate around the broad and rather long halls.

As they passed down various white hallways, Xi asked Laura, "Where are we heading?"

"The hull of the ship. I know an entry point."

This answer left Xi with more questions than answers.

After what seemed like thirty minutes worth of turning corners and zooming past halls, Laura came to a stop at a 4-way intersection, and placed a finger on her lips; a *'shhh'.* Xi's heart fell into a comatose state as she held her breath. They hid behind a corner as a group of ten men wearing the Discovery's blue uniform passed by the corner they hid in. After some time, they took a turn toward the halls opposite Xi.

Laura whispered to Xi, "The entry point is in the halls they came from." Xi nodded, and silently followed Laura as they snuck past the crew members.

At the end of the halls, there was a thick, metal door. The two flew towards the handle of the door and pressed a button on its side; sliding it open. The room looked like a crew break room, as it was a wide, white rectangular structure composed of various compartments that, although looked somewhat complex at first, had very simple purposes, like storing food or heating it. One of the walls had a massive window on it, giving part of the room a view into space.

"This way," said Laura, grabbing onto one of the handles on the walls and using it to pull herself towards a small hatch located in the corner of the break room; Xi followed.

"Is it a maintenance hatch?"

"Yes. It's used for engineer inspections of the hull."

The hull? Isn't that the last layer of metal separating the ship from space? Deadly. Laura seemed to have read Xi's mind, and said, "This hatch leads to the first and innermost layer of the ship's hull. It can get pretty cold, but it isn't dangerous."

Laura pressed a set of buttons on the hatch door, and it opened. The hatch's tunnel was extraordinarily dark and was circular in shape, with its metal walls emanating an ominous, rust-gray color. The tunnel was relatively small and claustrophobic, so much so that for the two to pass through, one would need to go above the other. However, that didn't matter much; there was no gravity.

Laura went into the hatch head first, using the handles on the hatch's door to push her into the tunnel and using its walls to continue downward. As terrifying as the tunnel looked, Laura performed these actions as if it were normal. With her body now three meters within the tunnel, she turned her head to look at Xi and said, "I've done this plenty of times… these past few hours, that is. You'll be safe."

Xi contemplated for a second, then placed her hands on the hatch's door handles. Reluctantly, she pulled herself into the tunnel and continued along with Laura. Although the tunnels were very claustrophobic— Xi did not have any space to stretch her arms— she felt a rather strange comfort in the dark abyss of the tunnel. Something about just Xi being in her own void without color; just her and her mind's imagination, made her feel calm. After five minutes of a quiet and rather awkward descent down the maintenance tunnel, Laura stopped.

"We've reached the other hatch. Hold onto something. Try to firm yourself in place."

Xi looked in front of Laura, and saw the exit hatch into the hull. Laura turned back again and asked, "Are you ready?"

Xi quickly widened her shoulders, and stretched her hands, as well as her legs, to grip onto the tunnel's walls. With the push of a few buttons, Laura opened the hatch.

Intense force. Xi felt an intense force push her toward Laura and the exit hatch. The force carried the cold air that the hull had, and made it somewhat difficult for Xi to hold on tight. However, Xi managed to persist, and soon, the cold air that filled the hull had finished moving into the tunnel.

Laura managed to exit the hatch and was now floating outside the tunnel, as Xi watched shiveringly, shocked by the stark difference in how the hull looked. Although the hull's walls were fully metallic, it managed to carry a somewhat yellow hue; most likely the dust that had accumulated. Compared to the rest of Discovery, which carried an eye-hurting all-white color on its walls and hue, this was much more different. It almost seemed as if this was a forgotten part of the ship.

Xi placed her hands on the exit of the hatch to help pull her out of it but quickly took them off. Although dust floated freely and never settled in space, if particles nearby were charged, like those in the metallic, magnetic, walls of the moving ship, it could become plastered *everywhere*. Laura still floated in front of her outside the hatch.

"A little dust never hurt anyone," said Laura. Xi nodded, and lifted herself off of the tunnel and towards Laura.

The hull of the ship was a deathly yellow; the type you'd find in an old office building when fluorescent lights bathed it in yellow, when so much dust accumulated it had practically managed to cover *everything.* As Xi flew towards Laura, she had to block her face to avoid the floating dust and frozen bits of water from touching her eyes.

Now that Xi was in the center of the hull, and a few meters away from the hatch she had come out of, she was able to get a good view of what shape the hull carried. It resembled a semi-cylindrical tube, the shape you'd get if you were to cut a cylinder along its height. The hatch Xi had come from was the flat side, with the opposite wall leading out into the other layers of curved metal hulls. Xi still wasn't able to see to the rest of the hull's length, as the ship itself had a curve to it, meaning the hull would too.

A silence emanated between the two. In between some shivering and rubbing hands, Xi asked, "Where are the others?"

"I don't know. They must've gone to search for other students."

"Do you know how many have survived?"

Laura looked down and thought for a few seconds.

"Not many."

Xi looked downwards as well. *If the extermination had been carried out so thoughtfully, shouldn't there be nobody left in the first place?* The view below Xi was rather odd. Although she had been used to the lack of gravity (she'd been in space for over a month), the view of the curving yellow walls meters below her seemed very strange. Xi had been used to living in the somewhat closed and tight halls of the ship, but to be weightless in such a large and strange place, especially dead center of it, seemed odd.

Xi truly felt nothing. She didn't feel her hands grasping onto a handle to help her move. She didn't feel her feet kicking off a wall. She truly felt nothing. Xi was just in the center of the hull's tunnels, meters away from each curve. She closed her eyes. Xi imagined herself in a blank, dark canvas.

Suddenly, in that dark canvas, a dot appeared; a distant star. Afterwards, another. And then another. Soon, many stars began to fill Xi's vision. After a good time's worth of multiple stars appearing, she was able to piece out what she was seeing; the overwhelming view of the universe she saw in her dorm's window. Xi considered opening her eyes back up, as she felt fearful at the view once more, but decided to keep them closed in pure curiosity as to what might come to her mind next.

Now, a very thick line of purple color, along with various stars stretched out in front of her; the Milky Way galaxy as she had seen earlier. Xi focused; she focused on one of the random stars in her vision. Soon, she was met with an up-close view of the star, and its orbiting planets. One of the planets looked like Earth in its earlier years; a beautiful mix of blue and green. It was a very calming sight for Xi; a place of warm hospitality, especially when compared to the dread given by the rest of space.

Xi was starting to fall asleep at the imaginary sight of the random star system's planet. Suddenly, she felt a tap on her shoulder, breaking Xi's vision in two, ultimately giving the star system a split and mirrored look. In a matter of only three seconds, the star system and its mirrored self merged, the duplicate Earth's crashing into one another, causing ultimate chaos before disappearing, along with all of the various other stars in her view. Although the mirroring, merging, disappearance, and sudden collapse of

peace seemed fast enough to seem instant, Xi was able to tell that each star disappeared one by one, just in a fast manner.

Her eyes opened back up, and she was once again met with the yellow haze of the hull. Xi looked to her side and saw Laura, who had been tapping her shoulder in an attempt to wake her up. Once Laura noticed that Xi had awoken from her imaginative universe, she told Xi, "Isn't this a good place to just… zone off?"

Xi, still recovering from that vivid dream of sorts, nodded in agreement.

15

Warp

3 hours and 30 minutes after the transmission was sent.

"During the final expeditions into the Fourth before the wormhole's collapse, people had found a note floating between rock structures, containing a sentence written in scrambled writing. It said, 'Do not progress. We do not want to gain the attention of others.' Shortly after this note was retrieved from the Fourth, a carpet bombing on Astral caused the wormhole to collapse on itself."

-**Description and Discovery of the 4th; closing remarks.**

Drepno anxiously waited in the command room of *Base Astral*. It had now been three hours since the transmission was sent to the NCC. He sat at one of the monitors, observing the map of transmissions, as Krinth stood behind him.

Krinth had also become anxious. "Do you think they've received it, my boy?"

"The man that we sent the message to should've."

"Do you know how unlikely the odds of this working are?"

At this point, Drepno's brain was beginning to simmer in frustration. *What if it didn't work out?*

"We just need some more time. Besides, if the message was sent and read, the person reading it would still need to decipher it and find a way to publicize it."

"You're right. But what if the message *wasn't* sent in the *first* place? Do you not realize how bad that would be-"

Krinth paused, as Drepno ran his hands through his hair and said in a somewhat anguished tone, "Excuse me. I just need time to breathe. I don't know why I'd care so much about this, yet I do. May I go outside the command room for a breather... or two?"

"Go at it. You deserve it."

Krinth nodded and watched as Drepno slowly stood up from his chair, stomping his way toward the exit door of the command center. As Drepno placed his hands on the door's handle, he lowered his head and said, "Let me know if anything interesting happens near Jupiter."

Krinth nodded once more.

"Understood. Find a telescope in Martian orbit that we can hijack. We must record Jupiter in the event of anything happening."

Drepno now stood outside the command room. The command room was relatively bright; it had display panels on its walls that had a live feed of the Martian landscape, giving it a bright orange hue. Most, if not the rest of the halls and rooms outside the command room had a dark and unnatural

blue hue to it; their walls were made of a blue metal of sorts. This gave most of the underground base a much darker coloring.

Drepno thought to himself for a few seconds. He thought of the mission that he was doing. *Why did I care so much whether or not the transmission was sent? Do I actually care about destroying the GUH? Jesus— I do, don't I?* Then Drepno thought for a second; *Wait a minute. Why would the GUH hide the discovery of the Dual System?*

For no reason at all, he began to recall that time he had been briefed by Krinth on the rules of staying at Base Astral.

He had been briefed after their descent on the base had been completed. Krinth turned his head around from the driver's seat and faced Drepno.

"Before I let you out, there are some rules to this place." Krinth lifted his right hand and pointed upwards with his index finger; a one.

"Rule No.1: For the first few days while you are here, don't go anywhere without *my* permission. This shouldn't be difficult, as I hope that you'll gain my trust relatively quickly."

Krinth now pointed his index and middle finger; a two.

"Rule No.2: After a while here, we hope to take you to the surface to complete various operations alongside us. Remember that while on these missions, you aren't looking for any medals of sorts. Don't be a hero. Think rationally, and that'll be more than enough to gain our respect."

Krinth smirked but soon again regained that dark and eerie face he had during the descent. He raised his ring finger; the third rule.

"Rule No.3-" Krinth paused for a second, as if to ponder over whether he would tell Drepno the third rule; or whether he *could* in the first place. He then continued, this time restarting the sentence.

"Rule No.3: Don't head off into the *redzones*."

"Redzones?"

"Yes. They are in the deepest parts of Astral, so you won't need to worry much; they are also covered in barriers, so it'll be easy to know when you are near one. These are areas that *nobody*— hell, even *I* can't go. It is for our safety. Everybody's safety."

"Why is it dangerous?"

"There are *things* in these redzones; things not even the best of today's researchers can come up with an explanation for. There are things I have seen there, things I *can't* comprehend to this day. I hate to say this, but it *shook me*. It shook me to my core, to realize how— how utterly *stupid* and *small* I felt. Sometimes, I feel as if the reason the Unionar never reached this base was because they *knew* of the redzones, and that they wanted to stay away from whatever was there."

A silence now filled the vehicle, as Krinth looked downwards, remembering what such hellish things he had seen. As Drepno looked at him, he noticed that his arms had gotten goosebumps; whatever he saw had most certainly *terrified* him.

Redzones. What's in them? Drepno glanced through the window of the communications room's door. Inside, he saw Krinth and Stasny working to

find coordinates of a viable telescope satellite. *They seem busy. There should be enough time.* Drepno quickly scurried off into the depths of Astral with one question in mind; *what could possibly be in the redzone*?

Taking off at a fast pace, Drepno spent the next few minutes sprinting from hall to hall. Although he did receive some unwanted attention from some of the members of the Seekers of Truth, they just let him pass through without concern— Base Astral is already *very* chaotic, so who would bat an eye?

As he ran non-stop, taking turn after turn, he began to notice a rather strange pattern; the deeper he went into the facility, the darker and emptier it seemed. At one point, the once crowded halls of the base were now empty, and the bright, fluorescent lights that were able to somewhat fill the halls with luminescence, were now heavily dimmed, ultimately giving an eerie sense of abandonment.

He now felt a sharp *tang* of sorts on his spine; *goosebumps.* These parts of the base had been continuously collecting dust, and now served as a view into the past. It seemed as if nobody had wanted to come here for a reason— *primordial fear.* At this point, it was getting harder to see, as the light bulbs above him had now almost entirely gone out.

Drepno struggled to see, but he had now seen what he wanted to— the taped and blocked hallway entrance. On the side of the blocked entrance, there were various writings on the wall. Drepno leaned towards it and squinted. One of the writings said, "*Do not enter! Do not enter!*"

At first, he thought it was just that side of the hall's wall that had scribbled writing over it, but as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to realize that the warnings were written *everywhere*. Whether it be on a corner

of the wall or on the very thin advisory tape itself, the statement, "*Do not enter!*" was written.

Drepno felt, once more, a terrifying feeling rush down his back. However, he disregarded it and ran right through the advisory tape. As he did so, he felt himself enter what felt like a new world. Drepno was still in the Martian base, of course, but his consciousness felt otherwise. Drepno bent downwards, gripping his knees using all the power in his hands. He was profusely sweating; it wasn't the same type of sweat he had gotten from the run to the lower parts of the base. Drepno truly felt disconnected, as he struggled to breathe.

As Drepno looked down the blocked-off halls he had gone through, he saw something floating in the center of the hall that shook him to his core; a round, reflective sphere of sorts. It was so reflective, to the extent in which Drepno struggled to comprehend its shape at points. Although it looked incredibly simple, and even beautiful to look at, something about it made Drepno wish he hadn't seen it. He sensed as if he knew something about the sphere he was looking at; something terrifying. Everytime he stared into it, he'd see impossible tessellations.

Struggling to his feet, Drepno soon collapsed on the ground. He got to his knees and tried to crawl towards the sphere. As Drepno got closer to the sphere, he got to view it better, but what he now saw was something he'd struggle to put into words soon. Everything and *everything* in everything was in that sphere. Just the complexity of its sight was enough to make his blood rise. Soon enough, Drepno fell to his side, staring at the sphere. As his eyes closed, a thought— a foreign, telepathic voice, suddenly arose.

You have seen all that lies before and after. You have seen what many can't. Yet I must continue my search— you are too close to danger.

Soon enough, Drepno was unconscious, and the sphere disappeared in a shrinking motion.

In the command room, Krinth and Stasny were crunching numbers. The past hour and a half were spent attempting to connect to one of the hundreds of unmarked and forgotten telescopes in space that were able to give a good view of Jupiter and the NCC. Suddenly, a voice in the back of the room yelled, "I found one!"

Krinth raised his head from Stasny's monitor, and yelled, "Well connect to it, goddammit!"

The man nodded and sent the connection links to all the people in the room. Stasny clicked the link that had popped up on his monitor and pressed a few buttons. In a matter of a minute or so, the television screens that covered the walls of the room with a view of Mars now covered them in darkness.

The man looked down at his monitor in concern. "Wait, this telescope is pointing a few degrees next to Jupiter, turn it a few to the left."

Stasny pressed the arrow keys on his keyboard, and soon, the dark space that was in the room became an almost blinding orange. As the telescope zoomed out, they now had a somewhat comprehensible view of Jupiter. Even though the TV screens were all covered in Jupiter's hue,

various small lines along its surface were now distinguishable, but that wasn't what they were concerned with.

Instead, it was the NCC station, which could be seen on the center television screen. Although its view wasn't so small you'd consider it a pixel on the screen, it wasn't too large, and people would need to run up to the front of the room to see it. Stasny pointed to the center television, yelling, "It's there! Come up front!" The thirty people in the back of the room rushed up to get a view. As Krinth squinted, he noticed a small glint emitted by the station. *This could be something.*

"Stasny, zoom in on the station and enhance the focus. I see something."

Stasny nodded and zoomed in on the station. Soon, the few pixels on the screen became enough to cover the entirety of the central television. As Krinth squinted, he realized that the glint wasn't just a glint, it was a decompression explosion. *Attaboy.*

Krinth yelled out in excitement, "Look at *that*! Who knew it'd work!"

Stasny wasn't surprised.

"I knew he could do it, no surprise in that."

However, something on the screen got his attention; a small, moving pixel moving away from the NCC. *A shuttle,* thought Krinth and Stasny in unison. They both looked at each other and nodded; they knew that they'd started a domino effect— a chain of events.

Suddenly, the room was filled with a bright light, one that managed to damage the telescope itself, lowering its exposure rate. "The ship escaped at Veloscale Five speeds!" yelled somebody in the back of the room. Krinth

and Stasny stared at each other once more, relieved that Drepno's message had worked… to some extent.

"He's a smart fella, this *Drepno*… isn't he?" asked Krinth.

"Indeed he is," responded Stasny, satisfied.

"I'll go get him. That boy should have the same relief we've had after all this contemplation."

Krinth opened the door, and his eyes widened as he saw that Drepno wasn't there. *He's likely in the restroom, or something along those lines, right?* Krinth stared at the empty halls for a few seconds, contemplating where Drepno may have gone. Stasny asked Krinth from inside the room, "Is he there?"

"*No.*"

Krinth walked back in and walked up to one of the guardsmen, who had been watching the show of events in the command room in a rather stale manner. Krinth spoke to the guard and said, "Radio out a search for Drepno Alder?"

The guard nodded silently, before speaking to a device within his ear.

As Krinth considered where Drepno might've been, Stasny was thinking over the situation that had just unveiled itself at the NCC. *How many people are in that shuttle? Hopefully, at least a group of ten. The more, the better the chances of having our hands on the message logs. I can't imagine just how lonely it'd be if there was just one person who'd managed to leave in the pod.*

16

Europa

"The *Slasher* subdivision within the 14th... they have quite a story. Behind the many knife-wielding soldiers of Division 14, the Slashers are the strongest. Though not mentioned as much due to previous scandals between technological oligarchs of the Unionar, the Slashers form a small group of ten men, each with military-grade exoskeletons. With aid of these exo's, they can deflect bullets, slice armies in half. After Semias' notorious 'warehouse massacre', he alone managed to slaughter a hundred Javian rebels with nothing but a light scratch to show for it."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Matteos awoke to a mind-boggling view outside the shuttle's windows. Outside the windows, a massive contrast of white, dotted landscapes lined along a dark, imminent void could be seen; Matteos' ship was slowly entering Europa's atmosphere. The past few hours had been plenty for Matteos, and he'd ended up falling asleep after the conversation with EXO.

The view was rather calming than terrifying; it made Matteos feel small, but in a good way that was hard to explain. The almost silent humming of various machines in the shuttle provided Matteos with a calm serenity of white noise.

"You're awake," said EXO, with its pillars attached to the walls.

"Yeah." Matteos turned to face EXO, then turned back towards the view of the window.

"So... this is what a planet is?"

"It's a moon..."

Matteos paused for a moment, before semi-sarcastically responding.

"Ahh, yes. You're right. I forgot that a moon is a celestial body in orbit of a planet, in this case, Europa orbiting Jupiter."

As Matteos stared off into space— or more specifically, the view of Europa, EXO's center pillar opened an eye and stared at him.

"You have a wonder for such celestial bodies, don't you?"

Matteos nodded. "Yes. I find space to be extraordinary. Too bad our ships of this time can't do much beyond our Solar System."

A silence grew between the two, until EXO said, "You wish to visit Europa, is that correct— "

Matteos interrupted EXO, immediately saying, "Yes!"

"Understood. Sit down please, as we will begin the landing procedure, and some turbulence may be inbound."

Matteos began slowly floating towards the front of the ship, then placed himself down on the seats, strapping in his various belts. Suddenly, he felt something strange. He felt some sort of force pulling deep inside of him. This force was almost nauseating to an extent.

Suddenly, that force grew stronger, and Matteos was able to pinpoint (to an extent) in which direction the force was pulling him; downwards. A glance outside the windows revealed that Europa's surface now looked completely flat due to just how close he was to the moon, and that same force was pulling his body towards it. *Gravity*, Matteos thought.

Matteos had already been wearing his space suit, and the helmet was strapped onto the ceiling kevlar above him. He tried to lift his hands to get it but felt an overwhelmingly large force pulling his hands back down. He felt almost immobile. Without warning, EXO detached itself from the walls. Matteos barely managed to turn his head and was beyond shocked to find EXO on the floor of the ship, rather than floating aimlessly.

"Is this your first time experiencing gravity?"

Matteos tried to make a response but found it difficult to speak under such small amounts of Europan gravity; his body was not used to any amount of gravity in the first place.

"Hm... that answers it."

EXO began molding itself away from the structure of a pillar, and into a small pool of metal, before thinning into a thin line; a snake of sorts. It slid into a hole in Matteos' seat and began filling and spreading out into small nerve-like tubes enveloping the chair.

What is it doing?!

Though Matteos was fearful, he was barely managing to make a face of concern and worry.

EXO seemed to have somehow sensed his fears, and spoke through the ship's speakers in response.

"Don't worry. I'm just doing what I'm meant to do; be an exoskeleton. It seems as if you have never experienced gravity, so even something like the small gravity of Europa is too much for you. I will provide structural support, alongside other necessary features."

Matteos was in shock; *Small gravity? There are heavier forces than this?* He began feeling a cold metal of sorts surround his suit in a vein-like structure. He felt EXO's metallic parts seeping through the chair and continuously expanding throughout him. He soon felt free again, free from gravity, and was shocked at how fast such a process took. Matteos' suit was almost entirely covered by a dark, metallic chain, yet he felt EXO adjust its size, allowing him to not feel too claustrophobic. That same metallic chain moved in unison with Matteos' nerve signals, allowing him to move freely as the metallic parts practically lifted him regardless of their weights.

"You can pick up your helmet now."

Matteos looked upwards towards the helmet and its Kevlar straps. Now, the gravity of Europa seemed to have affected the helmet, making it lower slightly more than it was already. Matteos raised his arm to grab the helmet— found it surprisingly easy, almost as if he was back at the NCC, in which there was no gravity directly forced on him.

He placed the helmet on his head, clicked a few airlock buttons on the helmet, and watched as the nerve-like structure of EXO's parts extended toward his helmet, almost as if a breathing, living creature pumped itself into life. Although the view was almost panic-inducing, Matteos had learned to trust EXO. He watched his reflection in the ship's front windows— and saw EXO's metallic parts create a smaller eye in the center above his helmet.

EXO spoke into his helmet, "We will begin a rapid descent in T-minus five minutes."

Matteos nodded and stared outside the front windows. He saw that the already massive view of Europa that covered half his front window's view, had now covered all of it. It took Matteos around a few seconds to realize that this wasn't just the massive size of Europa; his ship was *nose diving* into the white moon.

As the ship began gaining momentum, he felt it slowly shake; *turbulence*, Matteos thought to himself. Although Europa had a somewhat medium-thick atmosphere, it was still extremely difficult to pass it without a dent here and there. Only now did the small clouds of the moon's water vapor begin to thin out, and Matteos was able to see what could've been, the second-greatest view of his life; the striking patterns of red lines over Europa, all filled with dotted pores as a result of water drilling.

Although most of these lines had changed shape and familiarity due to the large amounts of selective water drilling, the few that remained were certainly a sight to be seen. Matteos watched in awe as these red lines expanded as he neared them; unaware that he had now passed the thin atmosphere of the moon.

By the time he realized, the ship was undergoing extremely unstable movement. Although the gravity of Europa was far lower than the Moon's, the amount of speed gained by the ship did indeed have its effects. Matteos watched as the small bar-like display of his ship showed his altitude slowly tick away, at first, 15 kilometers away from the moon; by now, it was at five kilometers.

Matteos watched in amazement as the dark void behind him slowly brightened, just barely enough to the point in which the sky turned a *very* dark gray of sorts. He was now only three kilometers above Europa's surface. The view of the planet was now beginning to terrify him. Some natural fear of his ticked off; a basic fear of heights, or falling. Although he couldn't quite explain the feeling at the time, he certainly felt it to a *great* extent.

Soon enough, the ship was only one kilometer above Europa, and Matteos felt as if the ship had just, shut down; it seemed as if it was only a fingertip away from crashing headfirst. Immediately and without warning, the ship took a sharp change in angle, making Matteos almost faint in the amount of gravity he felt. The ship was now at a 180° angle relative to the surface, perfectly parallel with the surface of Europa, and its deep gray skies.

Slowly now, but surely, the ship began lowering its altitude. Matteos watched in amazement at the skies now; he was shocked to see that they weren't a void anymore, but rather a beautiful mixture of dark-gray parted with thin, yet visible clouds. The ship came to a stop, and Matteos was now, officially, on the surface of Europa.

Initiating and Opening Logs From GUH Water Drill Co. (Base: Europa VI)…
NOTE: The communication delay between EUROPA VI and NCC-HIGHCMD during this time is approximately 2.24 seconds.

NCC-HIGHCMD: We request your urgent attention, Europa VI. We have come to warn you of a potential *terroristic* threat. NCC Emergency Shuttle ID #9374 has been hijacked and is now roaming rogue amongst the Galilean Moon Region. We urgently request that you run a satellite scan of the atmosphere to ensure whether any unknown objects have passed it.

EUROPA VI: Running scan… Indeed, we have found traces of unknown objects slowly passing our atmosphere at approximately over 100 kilometers per hour. As we assume such an object is a threat to the great Imperial Unionar, we can begin to mobilize our National Guard at drill sites nearest to the assumed crash site.

NCC-HIGHCMD: Begin mobilization in T-minus 24 hours. Do not be in a hurry, however. There is something, or rather *somebody* we wish to bring as a first wave before you rush in infantry.

EUROPA VI: Don't mind our asking, but what is it that you wish to bring?

NCC-HIGHCMD: We wish to bring the very man that allowed the terrorist to escape; another criminal. We wish to send him here first. We will let you know when you can send in mobilized infantry if, by mere chance, he *doesn't* do his *job*.

EUROPA VI: What a cruel punishment, that is, if he didn't deserve it. He betrayed humanity, and people who do such shall not deserve to exist in

this world. What do you plan to do with this man, if he *does* manage to kill the target?

NCC-HIGH CMD HAS LEFT THE CONVERSATION

(REASON OF EXIT: UNKNOWN/NORMAL EXIT)

EUROPA VI: That answered it.

17

Interrogation

2 hours after the finding of Drepno

"Rionar always had a bit of dimensional interference within him, now that I look at Xi's warnings and his final sayings. I first noticed it when he stared blankly at the Fourth during my first expedition... He knew *everything* about it, and he just needed me to confirm he wasn't insane."

-Drepno's Journal, chapter five; The Man We Call Rionar.

Drepno was seated in a small, dimly lit, metal room. He barely managed to regain consciousness and was surprised to find his hands cuffed to a table. Although his vision was blurry, he managed to make out a figure sitting opposite of him— Krinth. As his vision cleared, he was able to see that terrifyingly still face that Krinth had when he was *serious*.

The silence was cold; it was only composed of the two staring towards each other. Soon enough, Krinth said, "You know, your plan worked. We saw an emergency shuttle leave the NCC unpressurized, causing a minor explosion in the station."

Drepno was still recovering from the events he had seen, so he barely managed to muster out a-

"Good."

"Let's not waste time on this talk. Shall we begin the questioning as to what you were doing in the redzone?"

Drepno managed to give a slight nod. Krinth, noticing his fatigue, decided to give Drepno a small rest period before interrogation. When he returned, he snapped his fingers as a camera began recording.

Krinth: So, what made you enter the designated redzones? Do you know the potential dangers for *all* of us?

Drepno: I— I don't know... I just remember that conversation we had, and I decided to see what was happening in that area.

Krinth: There are good reasons *nobody* should go there. There are things that I can't even comprehend-

Drepno: The sphere. You think I can't comprehend? *I know what I saw!*

(NOTE TO VIEWER: After Drepno slams the table, it is seen that Krinth leans closer toward Drepno.)

Krinth: So, you are telling me that— wait, how old are you?

Drepno: Twenty...

Krinth: So you're telling me that a young man like you with less experience than me knows? *I am twice your age.* Tell me. What *did* you see?

Drepno: I saw *everything*. I damn well know what I saw, but it would be rather hard to put into words. I'll try, anyway. I managed to see every angle of every object in my vicinity. I felt like I could see almost every *bit* of an object down to the *atomic* level. If I were to see a chair, for example, instead of just seeing a normal three-dimensional chair, I'd see *all* of it. I wouldn't just see one side of the chair, but rather every nook and cranny in it, all spread out into vision.

Krinth: The fourth dimension.

Drepno: What?

Krinth: You've just described the damn fourth dimension, you smart bastard!

Krinth laid out a small, flat, piece of plastic around the diameter of his palm on the table. "Alright *fella*, I know my definition of it may be a little rough— I got it from our scientific department— but here it goes. Do you know what a single dimension is, Drepno?"

"A line?"

"Yes. You can only go left and right, and nowhere else, from what I heard. Now imagine a second dimension; another line intersecting with the first. You have a plane in which you now travel up, down, left, and right, but you can't *exit* its flat surface and into the air."

Drepno nodded.

"Then there's the third dimension, which comes out of that second. You and I both live in this dimension. And then we have the fourth dimension. How do we draw a line through this reality? How could you move there? What line can separate us from the third, the same way we can differentiate from this flat piece of 2 dimensional plastic?"

Drepno was stunned. He had never pondered such things.

"Ahh-hah, gotcha! You see, there *is* a pattern within each dimension. The same way you can just step out of a flat, two-dimensional surface, by lets say, blowing a bubble onto this piece of plastic that bridges into the third, we expect the same thing with the fourth. Some incomprehensible bubble can bridge us out of this plane."

"But how does that explain the ability to view everything?"

"We are gonna get there. See this same flat piece of plastic on the table?"

Drepno nodded.

"Good. Now imagine this as a two-dimensional plane once more. If you were to place yourself as a small creature living on such a two-dimensional plane, all you'd see is a thin line; the flat plastic surface around you. Now, if I were to place— let's say, a small piece of dust in front of you, it'd be impossible to see the other side across the dust, wouldn't it? However, as three-dimensional beings, we can. We can see every point on

this piece of plastic, while the two-dimensional being has limited viewing range because all he sees is a damn line."

"Interesting. What are you trying to tell me?"

Ignoring Drepno's question, Krinth continued, "Now, repeat this dust-placing process, but move up one dimension higher than ours, and we get the grand view of what the fourth dimension is. The walls in our third-dimensional room can be seen as small, flat lines to those in the fourth. Those in the fourth dimension can see almost everything in everything. They can see through the wall, along with all that exists around it. Since they look at us the same way we look down this flat piece of plastic, they see everything we *can't.*"

Drepno was silent. *How can I even begin to comprehend this?*

Krinth noticed Drepno's anxiety and said, "I was just as dumbfounded as you. Now, I'm even more; how did you even begin to make a shape out of the things you've seen in that sphere? None of us have been able to do that, let alone approach it."

Drepno managed to regain his breath, and said, "I don't know… Maybe I'm a messiah of sorts?"

Krinth paused, chuckled, then said, "Well then, I propose an offer. Maybe we can negotiate your innocence with the leader of Astral."

"How so?"

Ignoring his question, Krinth walked up towards Drepno, freed his cuffs, and said, "Stand up. I want to show you something. Follow me."

Drepno stood up and followed Krinth outside the interrogation room. As they walked through the halls, Drepno managed to catch glimpses of the people in the base staring at him. He noted that these stares weren't filled

with hate or fear, but rather, wonder. They wondered as to the things he had seen, or what he *could've* seen.

Soon enough, they entered a small elevator. After a few minutes of awkward waiting, the doors opened and revealed a view of the Martian landscape. As they stepped out of the elevator, Drepno realized he was hundreds of meters away from the walls of the base. Instead of being surrounded by tin roof walls and such, there was nothing but a raw Martian landscape. It was deep within sunset, and a beautiful purple sky lay above them. He looked back at the elevator and realized it was barely a small protrusion in the dark, red desert. The sky behind the elevator was an eerie deep black; the approaching night side of the planet.

The two stared at the beautiful desert for a while, noticing the small dot within the sky that was Phobos, until Krinth began speaking.

"The Martian landscape is a beauty to be held in. Cold desert; this is something very few Galgorians get to experience, surrounded by your dark towers, lights strong enough to blind you, and strict curfews. Look, you can even see the planet's superconductor ring in the sky!"

Krinth pointed at a distant, smaller dot in the sky. Located at the lagrange point between Mars and the Sun, it was barely visible.

Drepno looked downwards, and felt a slight shiver.

Krinth seemed to have taken note of this, and said, "It is also much colder out here in the rural regions. *Truly* a cold desert. Tundra. We will have to go back in a few minutes before it gets too cold. In the meantime though, I'll tell you what we can do to keep you innocent."

Drepno turned to face Krinth and nodded.

"We can use the large amounts you've already accomplished, like the method you've used when messaging the NCC, to prove how much value you have, but that won't mark you *fully* innocent."

"What should we do, then?"

"Well, the recording of your interrogation was sent to Rionar, the leader of The Seekers. He will soon realize your importance in the research of these redzone *spheres."*

Drepno jolted away from Krinth. "Hell no! I don't want to go back there!"

"Think about it. You may possess a tolerance that many don't have. You may have the ability to perceive what many *can't*. If you truly wish to figure out *why* certain things are the way they are, then this is the *best,* if not the *only* choice."

Drepno knelt towards the somewhat cold Martian dirt and felt it with his hands. *I must think. My choices are indeed limited.* He scooped a handful of the Martian dirt and felt it in his hands. He saw the red smears it made on his fingers. He was in *deep* thought.

Krinth, noting his state of mind, said, "We can go over this tomorrow. You still have a while until you meet with Rionar. he must be very interested in your case. You should get some rest; these past few days have indeed been tolling."

Drepno nodded, and the two soon went back down into the base.

18

Allyship

24 hours after the initiation of *Discovery's* Gas Extermination System.

"With each day that passes after the Catalyst, colonies die out without Unionar supply chains. Soon enough, Mars will too. It's only a matter of time."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Xi had a vision of sorts; she'd seen it in her dreams, when she managed to close her eyes for just a few seconds. Most notably, however, it was that same vision she had a few hours ago. She continuously had that view of all of the known universe— hell, maybe even all of it— ultimately collapsing. She watched in awe as various identical solar systems merged as one.

Beyond all of this, she couldn't help but relate that vision to the view of Neptune and that *bugged* map. She remembered when Laura tapped her shoulders, ultimately revealing the splitting and mirroring of a star system. She thought to herself, could this actually be related? Xi shook her head. *It's just a dream...*

She was awoken from deep thought when Laura opened the hatch across from her. As she made her way out of the hatch and into the hull, Xi

noticed other figures following behind her. She squinted to get a better look. Could it be? Xi soon realized that they were, indeed, other survivors.

As they approached Xi, she spotted something that all of them seemed to be carrying; thermal suits. Xi attempted to reach the inner walls of the dusty hull to reach Laura. As she did so, she couldn't help but feel entirely free. She felt like a fish swimming through a pond— no, an ocean.

Managing to grapple onto a thick patch of dust, hiding discomfort in its feeling, Xi asked, "You found others?"

Laura, slowly approaching with the group behind her, responded.

"Yes, and they happen to know the location of other survivors."

"Are they in the hull too?"

"Some are, and some aren't. The few who aren't, however, are getting eliminated by the crew. Those small survivor groups are slowly getting pushed back into corners. I still don't know why we've begun killing each other."

Xi, putting aside the harsh connotations, nodded, and asked, "Are those thermal suits?"

"The group behind me gave it as a gift— I showed them the vents and confirmed with them that the hull is a safe area. These suits will modify to a chosen temperature whether that be through heating or cooling. We should probably put it on now; it's cold out here. These suits also have thrusters— they are built for on-site maintenance to navigate large areas like these. Apparently, this group stole it from an armory."

Xi nodded, and the seven of them (new survivors included) began zipping up the suits. As she did, she couldn't help but find one of the

survivors oddly familiar. A glance revealed that the survivor was one of Marcus' friends; Molz.

"Behind you!"

Laura turned behind her to face Molz. She was confused.

"What?"

"Molz! The man behind you is one of the crew members, I recognize him!"

In realization, Laura and the others in the surviving group turned to face Molz in an almost violent state. It seemed as if at any second, they'd lunge at him. Just as tensions were to burst, Molz opened his mouth to speak.

"Please! They tried to kill me too, I swear!"

"They wouldn't kill the crew!"

"They would… At least *some* of it. Listen, other than students, they've begun killing low-ranking crew members, do you understand?"

Laura seemed to lower her guard, while Xi and the others still didn't believe him. Xi happened to notice this, and asked, "Why do you trust his word? He is clearly lying!"

Laura hesitated, but once she was able to put her thoughts into words, she said, "He isn't. Do you recall seeing only student bodies litter the halls of the ship?"

Xi considered Laura's inquisition for a second. She started thinking about what she saw on the path they took to the hull vents. She barely managed to remember the sight of some dead crew members floating in the corner of her vision, with the same symptoms as her very much dead friends; their yellowed and purple skin full of internal hemorrhaging. She

remembered the brushes that some of the crew carried; they were janitors aboard the ship.

Xi looked down, before shaking her head towards Laura.

"No. I've seen a few other bodies lying around. Do you happen to be a janitor?"

Receiving a nod from Molz, her assumptions were confirmed; Molz wasn't lying. As the group finished setting up their thermal suits, Laura made a pointing gesture to a far corner of the hull.

A random man from the group asked, "Are we heading in that direction?"

Laura nodded. Now, the group was off to find any other survivors who'd also made it to the hull. As time passed throughout the large, yet tiny chunk of metal many called "Discovery", the ship grew quieter and quieter. Many were either fleeing and searching for others in such massive hulls as Xi's group was, or dead. How much longer could this go on for?

19

Friendship

2 hours after Matteos' landing

"Certain regions of the ecumenopolis that was the Unionar's Earth were dead set on autonomously producing and industrializing products, especially for military use. Even after the Catalyst, when the towers within city regions began to rust and collapse on their own, these industrial regions continued pumping equipment without any sense of control. This can be seen today, in which a clump of accumulated ships are piled and can be easily viewed via satellite imagery."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Darkness. It was all that Kilnos could see. He had been knocked unconscious the other day and had awakened to pure darkness. With each breath, however, he could feel some of his air bouncing back towards him. This was more than enough to tell him he was in a space suit of sorts. Although it took a while for Kilnos to realize, he eventually found out he was under the influence of gravity. *H-how am I standing? I've never experienced gravity!*

Soon, however, reality kicked in. Kilnos realized he was being supported by a military-grade exoskeleton. Military grade exoskeletons were different from shuttle-grade; though they possessed the same strength, they were always in nerve formation, and did not communicate with the person within the exoskeleton. He knew that exoskeletons were only manufactured by the EXO corporation, an oligarch directly supplying

the GUH and only given out to people by the Unionar's direct order. He then remembered that Matteos had escaped under his supervision. Whatever the Unionar had, or would do to him most likely wasn't for good reason.

Oh no.

He heard a voice behind him. The voice said, "Kilnos Altzersin. You are subjected to kill a man of the first name… *Matteos.* Failure to complete said task within a twenty-four-hour deadline will result in *your* execution. The drop ship you are in will stop once it is a mile away from the target. Good luck."

Kilnos' eyes widened. *I— I have to kill him? No, this can't be. I just barely managed to muster up the mental strength to attack him on the NCC, I can't kill a friend—* that is when it dawned on him; *This is a punishment.*

Without warning, Kilnos' eyes were blasted with a rising light. A few seconds of adjusting his eyes revealed an oddly unsettling sight; the ship's gates opening in front of him. Kilnos watched as the massive wall of metal he was only a few feet away from began sliding upwards, further revealing the white Europan landscape.

Kilnos turned his head around as the opening gates blasted light into his part of the room. Behind him was a man; presumably the one that gave him the announcement. Kilnos managed to observe that the dark, gray space suit the man wore was very thin, almost as if to allow flexible movement in combat. However, Kilnos began noticing small, yet very much visible, black vein-like structures running through the suit, almost like a cancerous tumor of sorts; the man was also wearing a military-grade exoskeleton.

He managed to see three other men in the drop room wearing the same suits, each with a somewhat visible exoskeleton coursing through their suits. Soon, realization dawned on Kilnos once more. *They are prepared to face resistance from me…* valuing his possible choices, he canceled out resisting his punishment. *It would be impossible to fight against these highly trained men…*

Kilnos stared out into the Europan surface, slowly being revealed by the opening gate. As he stared, he soon realized that there was only one path he could go down— *kill* Matteos. Once the gate was opened to his head's height, he tried to stick his head out to view the ground. As Kilnos stared, he couldn't help but look downwards. What he once thought was a still drop ship on the ground was, in reality, quickly moving at altitudes of over five hundred feet in the air.

The view shook Kilnos. He began stumbling, and almost fell off the ship, but was stopped when his exoskeleton implanted itself into the ship floor on time. The guard behind him grabbed him by the back of his suit and pulled him further from the gate.

"Stupid bastard, you'll get yourself killed!" yelled one of the guards far back.

"Learn to wait," said the man who pulled him.

As if wanting to whisper something in his ear, the man leaned in, said, "Don't make a fool of yourself. Do something stupid, and I'll be the one to kill you."

Kilnos' throat tightened. Soon enough, one of the men in the back notified everyone and said, "We are three minutes away from the drop point."

Kilnos' throat tightened even more, to the point that he was almost struggling to breathe. In a shaky breath, he managed to ask, "Will I have any weapons?"

The man behind Kilnos snorted and started giggling. Soon, everybody in the drop room but Kilnos was laughing maniacally. The man said, "You think they'd make this quick and easy for you? Poor man. They want you to kill him with your fists. They want *his* blood to be on *you*."

Kilnos began mentally pulsating with fear. *No! Why. How dare the Unionar. What have I done? The whole situation was outside of my control.*

Before he could finish organizing his convoluted thoughts, he felt the ship touch the surface, and watched as the gate opened fully. As Kilnos' eyes began adjusting to the reflective surface of Europa, its beautiful landscape was revealed to him.

Kilnos stared in awe as the perfectly white surface of Europa shone with various glaciers and ice formations. A stare into the sky would reveal Jupiter in its grandness, as it managed to take up almost half of the semi-opaque Europan sky. The thin atmosphere of Europa allowed for a rather strange mix between daylight and the utter darkness of space.

"We're here now."

Kilnos ignored the man, as the entirety of his attention was locked onto the view of the moon's surface. He finally understood what Matteos had meant. The surface of these celestial bodies was just as beautiful as their dark, void-like counterparts. *I have to kill the man that brought me this wonder.*

The man behind Kilnos yelled, "Hey! Leave the damn ship already and go kill your buddy!"

"Throw him off already!" yelled one of the men in the back.

The man behind Kilnos tilted his head to the left, audibly activating his combat exoskeleton. In an almost swift movement, he managed to kick Kilnos out of the ship, disrupting the train of thought that Kilnos had. He went flying downwards, deep in thought, barely managing to grasp his situation. Although the ship had technically landed on the ground, the sheer size of it meant that the drop room was over fifty feet in the air, while the ship's landing gears were what touched the surface.

Just as Kilnos was ten feet away from making a fatal collision with the ground, his senses kicked back in; or rather, his exoskeleton did. His exoskeleton's collision prevention system initiated, causing various miniature, yet powerful jets on its nerves to engage. Kilnos' fall was halted, and he began his now calm descent onto the surface.

As his two feet made contact with the ground, he was calculating. As a matter of fact, during his entire fall, he was calculating, calculating his possible choices, and their possible outcomes. He thought on as he landed, and it seemed to him that the only choice he'd had left was to *kill* Matteos. Although he couldn't muster up the strength to do so, he knew his exoskeleton could do so very easily. He didn't want to do this, but this world wasn't made for wanting; it was made for needing. He *needed* to kill Matteos, whether he liked it or not.

Coming to acceptance of this fact of logic, Kilnos nodded to himself and turned to face the drop ship behind him. He watched as it rose off the ground in an almost hypnotic manner, its gates sliding downward, hiding the men who had kicked him off of it. He turned back to face the vast tundra. He saw a small waypoint on his display indicating Matteos'

location, and began powerfully hopping to the location, using the exoskeleton's gears as a source of speed. As he did so, Kilnos set on the 'following' indicator and thought to himself; *this is for me.*

20

Control

"Drill, drill, and drill."

-Aldoran Palmav, General of Europa's Ministry of Defense.

Matteos had set up a small, air-tight tent of sorts after he'd landed on Europa. It came with part of the shuttle, and he'd decided that now would be a good time to use it. He sat inside the tent, helmet to his side, as he considered his next plan of action. Though Matteos was new to this world, he knew that he was likely being tracked down. The tent was unnaturally warm; its insulation was of the highest tier, allowing it to be placed in almost any environment.

Though Matteos was still new to the gravity he was experiencing, he'd gone against EXO's advisory, and deactivated it's exoskeleton formation to try and get a better understanding of how gravity did what it did. Light poured into the tent from outside, as small portions of the tent had clear areas that served as windows of sorts. Matteos tried to stand up, struggled, and fell back down. *This is fun.* He crawled up to one of the clear portions of the tent's side and stared out to admire the beauty of Europa.

Along the semi-opaque sky and the iced landscape lay the shuttle Matteos had escaped on. Though it was relatively old technology, it was good enough to take Matteos where he needed to be. *Technology...* thought Matteos, as he stared at the ship. He could barely remember some of the lessons he'd taken in the NCCs Youth Station, but a concept he himself thought up from one of those lessons remained in his head as he stared at

the ship— *technological progress is exponential. It multiplies itself, instead of slowly growing. Humans began industrializing almost a millennia ago, yet it only took them 200 more years to land on the moon. Shouldn't we be beyond our Solar System by now?* Then, realization kicked in for Matteos. *Something is happening. Something is at play with the technology of humanity. Could it be—could it be the Unionar?*

Almost naturally, Matteos managed to kick himself away from the tent's side in fear, overpowering his lack of gravitational experience. Just as Matteos' vision began to blur, he heard EXO say, "There's somebody nearby. I sense their exoskeleton. We must go now."

Matteos just barely managed to regain control of himself, and allowed EXO to spread over his body. He slipped his helmet back on and slid out of the airtight vents separating his tent from the harsh landscape of Europa. The view outside was somewhat blinding, but as his eyes adjusted, he saw a small dot in the distance.

"EXO, amplify my view."

Matteos watched as a small, metallic arm formed from EXO's outer veins, and bent into his helmet to form a small optic of sorts. As he squinted into the optics, he caught his breath; that dot was Kilnos, moving at over seventy kilometers per hour, jumping every ten seconds or so.

He heard EXO's voice, "You seem to recognize him. Is he friendly?"

"I think… I hope."

Matteos began running towards Kilnos, even though EXO constantly advised him not to do so. After a minute or so, Kilnos' face could be seen; he was only half a kilometer away now. He waved towards Kilnos, but he *didn't* respond. He *didn't* slow down. Now, he was only 20 meters away.

Kilnos yelled, "I'm sorry!"

Just as Matteos began to regret his decision, Kilnos jumped towards Matteos with his exo-powered fists aimed at him. Matteos closed his eyes, awaiting impact, before realizing that he managed to block the attack with the aid of EXO.

"It doesn't have to be like this!" yelled Matteos, as the two rolled around the ground, struggling to land a punch.

"I had no choice!" yelled Kilnos, as he now lay atop Matteos, still attempting to drive his fist into Matteos' helmet.

"There *is* a choice! The shuttle I'm using is still operating! We can both get out of here now!"

"But they'd try to kill me! I -"

"You won't get out of this alive! You committed a crime against the Unionar by letting me escape! They want to kill *you* just as much as they want to kill me!"

Matteos felt the force on Kilnos' fists lighten, as he said, "You're… You're right."

"Please, Kilnos— you and me, exploring the beautiful planets and moons across the Solar System— *our* Solar System — laid out like gifts placed by gods, just for us to see. We can die standing and wandering, instead of kneeling and crying."

Kilnos let go of Matteos' suit. His face was of acceptance; he accepted his new fate. Just as the two began to accept their situation, Matteos felt something strange. He felt motionless. Somehow, EXO had disabled his control over the exoskeleton, and its tons-heavy nerve system began controlling him instead.

“Let's go, Matteo-” Kilnos abruptly stopped speaking, as if gasping for air.

Looking down, realization revealed something terrifying to Matteos— EXO had moved his fists with excruciating force into Kilnos’ rib cage. He watched in primal shock, as EXO began using his fists, pummeling them into Kilnos’ suit; all of it without his control. All he could do was stare in shocked stillness, as his *own* fists went straight through Kilnos.

Just as EXO slowed its punching movements, Kilnos managed to gasp out a single sentence— “Explore for me,” — almost as if he’d known Matteos’ movements were beyond his control.

21

Tool

"You and I aren't so different after all, Drepno."

-**Semias Umbra, Slasher of Division 14.**

Drepno's bunker was excruciatingly cold. Colder than it was when he first arrived. The Seekers of Truth had held a conference regarding Drepno's future at the base, and before they could get a final say as to what they'd do with him, Drepno was expected to be brought in for his word. In the meantime though, under the orders of Rionar, Drepno was held in his bunker room, with all of his belongings taken away from him.

Though it was rather ironic and hypocritical that a rebellious organization dedicated to destroying a mostly authoritarian empire would take away his items and hold him captive, Drepno knew it was *logical*. The Seekers of Truth (ST), in only three days of bringing in an outsider, had lost him and encountered a threatening revelation from that same person. Could they really trust Drepno? Besides, even now, they'd allow him to express his view and his possibilities regarding the situation; something Drepno found odd, especially since people just went missing in Galgoria instead.

A knock at the door was heard. Drepno opened the door, saw the two guards standing at the door's side, and Krinth across from him.

"It's time."

Drepno nodded. The two walked outwards into the dark blue hallway, and as they did so, he noticed that the two guards who once stood at the door were now following them.

"Pay no attention. They are just escorts."

"Why would I need escorts?"

"They don't want you running off."

"Why would I run off?" Drepno was testing Krinth's patience.

"Because you've already ran the first *fucking* time! Listen— you've managed to unlock valuable information on a subject blurry to us at Astral, and maybe even the entirety of humanity. You could be the key to a chest containing centuries worth of lost information. Perhaps even what happened to the previous crew at Astral..."

Drepno nodded, and remained silent. The halls were almost entirely empty— eerily so. *They must be at the court...* Within a few seconds of realization, Drepno realized that *everybody* at the base was interested in his case. Reasonably so, this may determine the future of Base Astral's research.

Suddenly, the lights went out, and the humming of the base fell into a deathly silence. Drepno began to panic, but one of the guards assured him.

"Don't worry— just another Iron Hawk scan. The lights here will go back on in a few minutes. We can keep walking."

After a lengthy amount of walking through the corners and curves of the base with the use of silent lights, they stopped in front of a massive wall of sorts. Drepno could almost immediately tell that the ceiling was now *way* higher than it had been a few seconds ago. The echoes that bounced back off his footsteps told him the ceiling was at least 50 meters in height. Almost as if perfectly timed, the lights in the facility turned back on, revealing the grandiosity of the area they were in.

Drepno stared at the wall in its imposing scale; the walls around him *did* indeed measure 50 meters in height, but by the looks of it, they seemed much higher. He squinted at the blue wall in front of him, and noticed a moving crack in it. *This isn't a wall... it's a gate*. The somewhat claustrophobic, dark-blue, metallic walls and hallways that Drepno, Krinth, and the escorts had passed through ultimately led to a massive gate room. Somehow, this massive area, *specifically* designed for opening a large gate, managed to keep the same characteristics as the previous halls — just on a much, much larger scale.

"I told you he'd be shocked. Where's my betting money, eh?" spoke Krinth, facing the two guards.

They remained emotionless; at least that's what Drepno could tell by their masked faces.

"Oi, brighten up! It was a joke, y'know," yelled Krinth in a sarcastic manner.

The group stood only a few feet from the slowly opening gate. Drepno watched in complete awe as various gears and pistons (many of them decades old now due to a lack of maintenance) moved in a compelling motion. The gate's opening speed began moving faster and faster, and soon, a view of the room ahead was revealed.

The auditorium looked much more like a court of ancient times, but the spectators and other members of the court sat on high benches laid atop massively tall pillars. These benches, pillars, and even the walls of this room were made of extremely dark-green marble, bathing the room an eerie, green toning. The entire aspect of the room was to make it seem as if

the people on trial (Drepno, in this case) were minuscule bugs, being watched by higher beings, in a literal sense of sorts.

Surrounded by massive, dark green marble walls full of people watching from above, Drepno felt uneasy. He started profusely sweating, and his face became red. He didn't like crowds.

A person sitting atop the highest marble pillar in front of Drepno seemed to have taken note of this, spoke into a microphone, "This place used to be a storage room for the original members of Astral— did you know *that*?"

Though Drepno couldn't see the man due to how high he was, he could hear his voice clearly, followed by a chuckle.

"Ahh-ahh, don't be afraid, Drepno. We know this may seem overwhelming, but after various discussions, the odds *are* in your favor."

With a scratched voice, Drepno managed to ask while looking up, "They are?"

The person stood from his seat, and revealed himself to Drepno with his both arms spanned in a welcoming and chivalrous manner. This person was Rionar, the leader of Base *Astral*. Almost every mannerism and characteristic of him matched the description Krinth had given him the past day; his dark, red hair, the slits between his eyebrows, the calm, locked look he always carried with him, and the fine, black suit he wore at all times. He was *always* calculating, planning the next action or event. Even now, with him standing valiantly and warmly, Drepno could tell that deep in Rionar's head, he was in an inner state of thought, *speaking* to something within his consciousness.

"Indeed, they are. You serve a great purpose to us! I don't know if *use* is a good way to describe it, but we can *apply* you to come up with an answer to our most discombobulating questions surrounding the redzones, and how they work."

"What if— what if I deny?"

Rionar's face darkened. Now his *true* face of rock-hard logic had shown past his facade. Drepno heard murmuring in the crowd above him. *I'm gonna regret this.* Almost as if the cold and logical face Rionar had was nothing but a make-believe vision Drepno had for a few seconds, he reverted to his *welcoming* face.

"*I know* you won't."

"You're right. I was just… *curious*." Drepno really was curious— he wanted to figure out how that calculating manner in Rionar worked, and he did, in a sense, find out. By only having his metaphorical 'mask' taken off for a second or two, Rionar had managed to calculate five steps ahead of Drepno, managing to not only dodge the sketchy question, but answer some of the other questions Drepno subconsciously had in mind.

"Great! Do you agree to becoming a high-ranking member at *Astral*, in exchange for your knowledge and insights? Court spectators are witnesses to your response."

Drepno nodded. He knew that he single-handedly made a life-altering decision once more.

"Excellent. This session has been concluded. We now welcome Drepno as a High-level Research Agent. You will be working alongside some of our best, being able to visit any part of our facility, *especially* redzones."

Drepno watched in a fear-induced wonder as the murmuring crowd left through the dark-green marble doors beside their chairs, almost as if the doors were part of the walls themselves. The processes in this hearing were odd— the ways in which Drepno had little time to process what was happening, or whether he had any say. This was another entirely different side of revolution; the *ugly* one. He'd thought of the amount of dilemmas that were in such a situation; an organization that seemed so keen on revolutionary ideals at the top, yet continued practicing— though on a smaller scale— the very opposite ideals in order to favor themselves.

"Well, that concludes that. Now, wasn't that fun?" said Krinth, patting his shoulder.

Drepno wasn't so cheerful, though. He considered how he'd be a *tool* of sorts for the Seekers. Maybe it was for the good of research, but he heavily resented the sheer thought of going back into a redzone.

"Lighten up. You may have seen Rionar's colder side today, but he's a good guy. Besides, it was either this or continuing to be held captive. Trust me, you made a good choice."

"I guess so, but it all just seems… off."

Now, the auditorium was completely empty. The only people left in such a room were the two of them. This gave off a feeling of urgency for Drepno— he didn't like these empty spaces.

"First time? Listen, don't fuss about it. Let's head back to the command center, we have some work to catch up on."

Drepno nodded, and the two headed back into the regular, narrow halls of the facility, as the massive gates closed behind them.

Expedition

A day, and three hours after the Gas Extermination System was initiated

"If it wasn't for the Unionar, our technology would've become beyond unrecognizable."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Xi was beyond exhausted. Though they'd been simply traversing a wide ship hull devoid of gravity, it was a hull; oxygen was rather thin and every movement made was more energy-consuming due to the thick thermal suits. To add a cherry on top, she hadn't slept for an entire day, with those waking hours being one of the most traumatic experiences in her life.

However, Xi wasn't the only one exhausted— the various people in her group had also shared similar experiences. In an attempt to solve such an issue, while also remaining secure and in movement while attempting to find other survivors in the hull, Laura devised a plan; the group would travel in pairs, each person in a pair tied together by a piece of cloth. As one person moved along with the group, grabbing a piece of thick dust alongside a hull's walls after another, the second person in the pair would be resting. In the weightlessness of space, it'd be no problem to carry another person with you.

It'd been an hour's worth of traversing when this plan was put into action. Xi had been paired with Laura, and altogether, the group formed a total of three pairs, with Molz by himself. Laura had allowed Xi to rest first, and gladly accepting it, she let go of the dusty walls.

Almost as if a sudden darkness emerged into her vision, Xi immediately slipped into a deep slumber. *Nightmares*— it was all she could experience after the trauma she'd received. The bodies she'd seen on the ship, followed by visions of the yellow hull flashed through her head, flickering in and out. As these varying visions flashed in her head, Xi felt as if she had no control over her dreams; she wasn't conscious and aware of them in the first place.

At first, it was subtle; Xi slowly began rotating upward, backward, and in any other direction she could see as the images of dead bodies flew around her head. Then it sped up. Soon enough, Xi was seeing these same terrifying visions, but in the blink of an eye now, as her vision spun chaotically. Soon, it was all a blur. Each and every vision she saw was now just a blurred mess as they flew through her mind faster than she could compile them.

Eventually, her vision and her mind spun so chaotically that she suddenly *no-clipped*. Now, those horrific visions stopped, alongside her spinning. All she could see now was a small dot in the distance; *Discovery*, as it moved further and further away from her. Everything surrounding the ship was pure *void;* the emptiness of space. Almost as if getting picked up and pulled away with a tweezer, she felt an incomprehensible force pull her away from the Solar System, and into deep space— far beyond the Milky Way and into the void that filled the space between each galaxy. This was *true* darkness, as dark as it could get.

Suddenly, a *thought* appeared. It wasn't a voice or a vision, but just a thought. It felt natural, but Xi *knew* this wasn't her thought.

Dreaming is a form of inner communication, a message from the depths.

Though it was a simple statement, this *thought* shook Xi. She knew this thought wasn't hers— it felt foreign; almost as if *somebody* had told her that. Her mind exploded in over-stimulation at the sheer consideration of all the possible meanings that message had. *Depths?*

As if perfectly timed and orchestrated, Xi woke up to the sound of people talking. She lifted her head and saw over thirty different survivors floating from corner to corner of the hull. The group had finally found a survivor settlement.

"You're awake," said Laura.

Xi nodded. Though she was physically where she was, her mind was almost entirely focused on that phrase. *Dreaming is a form of inner communication, a message from the depths...*

"How much time has passed?" asked Xi.

"Two hours. We've just found another patch of survivors, and we will either stay here until we get news of where this ship is now heading, or until we take arms and head back into the main sections of *Discovery,* ready to fight."

Xi took in the weight of Laura's words. They would *eventually* find out where the survivors were. The students and low-ranking staff would *eventually* have to hold their ground, even if it meant they'd die trying.

Laura unhooked the tied cloth and went off to the center of the settlement. She flew to a survivor who was sharing a small ration with some of the others. Pointing at Xi, she convinced the person to give her two small, yet meaningful pieces of bread. Laura flew back towards Xi and gave her the second piece.

"I just had a vision," said Xi, attempting to break the silence between them, hardened by the trials they'd experienced so far, and the trials they were likely to experience in the coming days.

"A vision? It's nothing but a figment of your-"

"Yes, I know it came to me in a dream I had just now, but it felt *real*. Though I can't remember everything that happened, I can vividly imagine a thought that appeared in my mind during a certain portion of it."

Laura hesitated, before asking, "A thought? What was it?"

" 'Dreaming is a form of inner communication, a message from the depths.' The thought didn't feel like it was mine though. It felt… it felt *foreign.*"

"That's strange… it stated itself as a 'message from the depths', while also having a sense of coming from something foreign? Do you think that might mean something?"

Xi nodded, and stared downwards at the dust-covered hull. *A message…*

Vengeance

Ten minutes after the death of Kilnos.

"Though Kilnos' body remained untouched after his death, memorialized by the sterile freezing of Europa, it disappeared a year after the Catalyst. I made him a proper grave."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Matteos had spent the past few minutes emotionless, kneeling at Kilnos' body. Occasionally, he'd stare at his red hands; stains of frozen blood lay there— his friend's blood.

After a distant silence, Matteos muttered something under his breath.

"Detach."

"But you will struggle to move without me. This moon has too much gravity for you. You won't even be able to stand-"

Matteos began shaking in anger. "I said, *detach*."

"We don't have time for this-"

"Detach, you *bitch!*"

Almost as if humiliated, EXO slowly retracted its nerve-like parts and backed into its original pillar shape, now standing in front of him. Matteos immediately felt a loss of energy, almost as if he could feel a *force* tugging him downwards. *Gravity.* Matteos struggled to stand upright, but as he thought of the atrocity EXO had made him commit, he felt *angry.*

He was mad he'd just killed his only friend with his own fists. He was mad at the fact that an AI that had managed to save his life did it for him, leaving him without any control over his actions. Matteos was mad at how

he and Kilnos could've done something, instead of murdering each other until a tear broke in a suit or a helmet cracked. He was angry at the *fate* that drove such terrible consequences. He was mad at the sheer thought that an empire spanning the entirety of the Solar System would spend their time forcing two people, both grown side-by-side, to ultimately kill one another, regardless of what they tried to do. He *hated* how they pinned them against each other. He was reaching the bounds of insanity.

Almost as if natural, Matteos stood against the gravity of Europa. As he did so, he stared straight into EXO's center eye, with a burning anger within him. Somehow, from somewhere, Matteos gathered the energy to run into EXO in an attempt to knock it down. By the time he managed to make physical contact with EXO, his energy had almost entirely run out, and instead of pushing EXO, he only managed to lay and rest his body against it, still using every ounce of strength in his body in an attempt to knock it over.

A now emotionally disconnected Matteos lay against EXO's pillars.

"I'll *never* forgive you."

EXO's eye looked downwards as if it was in pity. It could've saved Kilnos, but by the time he'd switched to Matteos' side, it was too late. It'd made all the necessary calculations to consider Kilnos a threat. EXO watched as Matteos lay his head against the lower half of its pillars, yelling in a saddened rage, driving his fists into its metallic body in a feeble attempt to damage EXO. His punches were useless, but he didn't stop. Matteos was undergoing a loss so great, that he did not care if his fists would come out bruised and bleeding after his punches.

"We must go. *They* are coming"

Matteos stopped punching. He began crawling away from EXO.

"I'm not going with you! You— you *monster*."

EXO backed away and looked further downwards. Matteos could tell that EXO was saddened by these words. Even if EXO really was just a long string of binary, it still had code that could make it *feel*, in a sense, much like how humans have hormones that change the way *they* feel. A small part of him felt bad for EXO; it was just trying to do what it could to protect its subject. Though Matteos' face was of complete rage, a being with enough psychological knowledge like EXO could see the small traces of regret on his face after speaking that sentence.

"Matteos. I need to tell you something important."

"Now? At *this* time? Ha. Haha." Matteos was tired, tired of it all, but he seemed willing to listen.

"When I bypassed my code to protect you on the ship, it wasn't *just* because you appeared innocent."

"What do you mean?" Matteos had lost almost everything that life had value attached to, all in the same day, and was now about to experience yet another shock. He tried to stand up but fell back once he moved his arms. He looked up at EXO, his helmet fogging to his breath.

"An artificial intelligence system will never bypass code. Code is like a set of laws set in stone for us— much like the physical laws of our universe. The only way I'd be able to break such a strong law is if another, stronger law contrasted the very aspect of the other. Like a condition set before another."

Though Matteos understood what EXO had stated, he wasn't able to pick up on what it was trying to tell him.

EXO realized that he was confused, changed the topic and asked, "Do you remember Project Starseed, in which humanity sent embryos to deep space?"

Matteos nodded.

"It began when you were born."

"What-" Matteos was confused.

"How could this happen? I assisted in-"

"They're false memories. All of your memories from that point and before are false."

Matteos slid further backward in shock.

"You *did* technically assist. You were the *first* demonstrational *test subject*."

His eyes widened. He understood it *all* now. Those memories of him guiding the various Starseed Embryo Ships across the outermost layers of the Solar System were put into his mind. *I remember when I first gained consciousness now. First.* It was a trigger word that opened his memories.

Floating. His eyes opened. An eight-year-old child stared out into a world of dark green. The child was *immersed* in such, dark-green fluid; he was in a liquid tank of sorts. The child almost immediately felt a loss of breath and attempted to swim out of the dark fluid he was trapped in.

He swam even faster when he realized that there *was* light above. He didn't know who he was or why he existed, but he only had one goal: live. He tossed his hands back and forth, attempting to find his way out of the liquid he was in.

With a struggling final act of desperation, he reached out for the light above him and saw a pair of silver-colored arms reach for him from the light. He felt safe under such arms. The child knew that these arms would pull him from the dark confines of the testing tank he was in.

As he was lifted from the embryo tank, the child felt the almost blinding light of the world outside such a tank. He was no longer in a tight confinement of liquid but in open, breathable, air. Though the child's vision was blurry from only god-knows-how-much time in the embryo tank, he could clearly define the figure that had picked him up; a once pillar-like structure with its own artificial intelligence, that managed to shape itself into a more humanoid shape in hopes of comforting his 'awakening' into this world.

The structure spoke.

"Demonstrational unit #1 has been awoken early. Compiling and decrypting unit numbers to form a name."

After a moment of consideration, the structure that held up the child managed to speak a single word; the name of the child from here on out.

"Matteos. You have awakened."

Matteos remembered it *all* now with the use of a single trigger word; *first*. He'd been raised as an embryo for Project Starseed itself, being grown on a small, distant station orbiting above the dark world of Neptune, with the only form of communication being a robotic system aboard it. As the first creation of the project, he was taught basic concepts alongside twelve other, artificially-made children. As they all spent time isolated from the rest of humanity, they'd partake in 'scans'; an event in which false memories

from other people would slowly, but surely, be placed into the minds of such children to ensure that they forget of their creation.

However, as experiments went on, Project Starseed eventually began launching its full-scale operations. Though the Unionar considered killing all the children aboard the station now that experimentation was over, they decided that the children would make good subjects to study the effects of embryo growth through age. They'd send off a child filled with false memories to spend the rest of their lives doing a mundane job built off of such memories.

A good example would be Matteos himself. After being seen as a 'discarded' test subject, they had a scan session on him, in which they implanted memories of an NCC worker who assisted in Project Starseed, but then *disappeared* due to malpractice. They could use a good coverup. The input memories would include the moment of birth of such a worker, to the moment they assisted in Project Starseed. However, some of that *malpracticed* mindset was also etched into Matteos.

By the time Matteos awoke from these implantations, he would've already been nearing Jupiter in a small pod sent from Neptune.

As Matteos' hibernating body flew across the Solar system at extremely fast speeds, he wasn't alone. A miniature, yet flexible AI system produced by the Exoskeleton Industries was booted into the pod. It covered and surrounded Matteos' body as it flew through space with only one goal programmed into it— to protect him. As the pod flew through asteroids and space debris, the system changed the pod parameters to ensure his safety.

However, by the time Matteos arrived at the NCC, the technological team removed EXO from him and repurposed the AI to function as an emergency shuttle system that wouldn't see him again until then. However, they had made a fatal error that would cost them greatly in the future; they had forgotten to remove most of EXO's original code. They'd forgotten to remove its protection parameters, set at a higher priority than the new code.

"Do you understand now, Matteos? All I have ever wanted to do is *protect* you. It has been part of me since day one. I saved you on almost every occasion, even against GUH commands, not out of a simple need to protect my passenger, but to protect my *son*. *I am* your maternal, and your paternal guardian."

Tears slid out of Matteos' eyes. *Everything* was clear to him now—every action EXO made to save and protect him, and every way it reacted to his responses. He felt even more rage now, though it wasn't towards EXO—it was towards the Unionar itself. The GUH gave him an existence far beyond any meaning. It gave him a mundane life, and was now '*exterminating*' the guinea pig that he was.

The past 26 years of his real life had just been revealed to Matteos, and all he could feel was anger at the thought of such a cruel idea. Matteos mustered up his final strength to run towards EXO once more.

EXO widened its center eye in fear at first, but soon calmed after realizing that this time he didn't run up to EXO to hurt it, but rather, to embrace it. As they embraced, Matteos mumbled to EXO.

"I'll let you switch into Exoskeleton Formation."

After EXO molded around Matteos′ embrace in that now familiar nerve formation, he compressed his tent into a compact formation the size of his hands, all with the push of a button. He walked into the shuttle and turned on its engines to Veloscale Five. He set the trajectory to the NCC, and watched as the dark, teal liquid filled the cabin. This gave him a familiar sense of how he spent his first eight years in an embryo tank, being born into the cruel universe we call ours.

As the countdown neared five seconds, Matteos thought to himself, *I will take the GUH down with my hands.*

A small console displaying EXO′s thoughts had a small line of text appear.

`In the name of exploration.`

24

Fourth

The start of Drepno's venture into The 4th.

"Though Exoskeleton Industries use the full name when referring to the exoskeletons they produce, multiple groups, especially the Martian National Guard, refer to them as an 'exo'."

— **Slang Across the Unionar; Slang of Mars.**

Drepno asked, "How much longer?"

Krinth checked his watch, tapping it a few times to make sure, before saying, "Thirty minutes."

Thirty minutes...

Drepno had spent the past few minutes in the command room before his first expedition into the redzone anomaly. Though he had mostly despised the sheer thought of doing what Rionar had instructed, he came to realize that he *missed* that strange feeling of being near the sphere.

He missed that feeling of a truly *open* world, in which he could see *everything*. He missed how *odd* it seemed. He could vividly recall the voice that he heard before he fell unconscious; it sounded like his, but with a slight difference in tone that only he himself could notice. The empty mystery in this voice...

It called for him.

'You have seen all that lies before and after. You have seen what many can't. You have managed to comprehend something no one has.'

"You alright?" Krinth could see that Drepno was sweating as he intensely thought over what had happened earlier.

Drepno nodded, and quietly said, "I'm ready."

With a nod sent back from Krinth and a transmission into a small radio at his hands, the scientific department of Base Astral entered the command room, and Drepno began changing into the needed equipment.

The equipment that the department gave Drepno was rather strange, though not in its purpose; a space suit meant to provide oxygen and protection, alongside some recording devices to provide back-to-back feeds between the overseers of the experiment and Drepno. The strange thing that Drepno had picked up on, however, was the appearance of such equipment; no logo or insignia that'd give the equipment any form of identification.

The overseers of the experiment always stood ten paces away from Drepno as he walked through the halls of *Astral*. Drepno could clearly see the looks on the faces of the people he passed by; *awe*. It was the same awe that they had given him in the past few days, but it was matched with fear— not the normal fear many give when facing danger, but the fear given at the unknown. *Unknown.* He knew he'd be facing a new *unknown* within the next few minutes.

As he walked through varying halls, Drepno saw a few stretchers carrying shaking bodies. He thought of the odd influx of people at the base's infirmary. Only a few days ago, there had been many reports of people getting odd convulsions almost instantly, until they either died or returned to consciousness, unaware of what had happened. It wasn't just in the base. Tapping into global communications recently revealed that a rather strange amount across Mars had fallen to this odd situation. There was almost no connection between each person, other than the fact that they had similar levels of intelligence. Drepno shook off this thought.

A man came running through the halls in a rather panicked manner. After a slight squint, Drepno realized it was Stasny. As he stared across at him, Stasny stopped in front of him. Drepno paused his walk and heard the immediate stop of the overseers behind him.

Stasny spoke. "Is it true?"

Drepno backed a step, in wonder of what meaning that question had.

"What is?"

"The encounters in the redzone, Drepno. Are they real?"

Drepno stared at Stasny's face. He had that same sense of awe, but there was no fear in it.

"We will find out today."

"Be safe, alright?"

Drepno nodded and continued walking past Stasny. He watched in surprise as the group of overseers followed behind Drepno, slightly shoving him to the side. As he stared at them, he couldn't help but notice one of the overseers. *This one wears a hood…* Stasny watched as a small strand of hair slid out of the overseer's hood. *Red hair… Wait— red hair?*

The halls were beyond empty now. Just by denoting the slight change in lighting and the older, poorly maintained materials used in the walls around the halls, one could clearly tell they were approaching the redzone. The last time Drepno was here, he felt an incomprehensible fear— this time, it was different. He'd grown a strange *peace* with such an area. He didn't quite know where this came from.

At a certain point, all overseers stopped following Drepno, except for one. As the two headed far from the overseers, a faint "Do you read? Over," could be heard emanating from both of their radios.

Drepno pressed the button on his radio.

"We read. Over."

As he slid a door open into an even dustier hallway, he began feeling the *presence.* He began feeling the hairs on his arms go up, along with the rest of his body as he entered this new set of halls. As the pair continued walking, checking the camera feeds attached to their helmets, Drepno could easily tell that the overseer with him was unnerved. He noticed how the man stopped every once in a while to place his hands on his knees and breathe, or how he checked his back, almost as if he heard things.

"First time?" Drepno asked, looking back at the man.

The man lifted his head slightly, nodding.

Now, Drepno could *truly* sense *it*. Being so close to the strange sphere had given him sensations that couldn't be forgotten. The man behind him began profusely sweating. In an attempt that Drepno thought would calm him down, he asked him to lower his tinted visor. The man obeyed, and oddly enough, he seemed to have calmed. Drepno assumed this was because he couldn't see as clearly, so he'd be able to reflect and control his thoughts more.

With the man partially blind, Drepno carefully guided him through the halls. As they approached an abandoned crew bunk room, he felt his senses at their peak. Drepno told the man to close his eyes and try his best to remain conscious. He knew for a fact that *it'd* be there. With the slide of

a door, he saw the sphere, calmly suspended mid-air in the center of the bunk room.

It wasn't like the previous encounter. Now that he could envision the sphere better, he saw its beautiful details. Drepno told the man behind him he'd found it.

Drepno heard his radio turn on, as one of the overseers spoke a single word.

"Jesus."

In front of Drepno, he didn't see a regular metallic sphere. It wasn't metallic in design at all. In it, he saw a strange view of his world; a 'reflection' of sorts. He saw the reflection of what seemed to be the man behind him, but it wasn't normal. He noticed that he could see every part of him. Every artery, bit of clothing, and pulsating vein. He watched as this showcase of 'living art' displayed in front of him. He watched in terror as every pulse in the man's body could be seen via the shaking of his heart.

Almost letting out a scream of fear, Drepno fell to the floor below the orb. As he fell, he saw the man behind him staring at the orb in awe. Surprised to see that the man was in one piece, Drepno let out a sigh of relief. The man, however, stood in shock, his eyes widened, as he stared into this mind-bending view of the world. As Drepno stood up, he realized in amazement that the two of them were still conscious. He watched as the man walked up to this sphere, this plane of existence, and placed his hand into it. Drepno tried to reach for his arms, but by the time he noticed, it was too late.

The two stared in awe, as the hand he placed disappeared into the orb. Looking from the side, Drepno saw a terrifying sight; the flesh and

bones of the man's arms, almost as if he was viewing a cross-section of them, but instead you saw each side and corner of the arms all at once— a four-dimensional cross section. Drepno grabbed the man's suit in fear and forcefully tugged him away from the orb. As the two fell next to each other, they both stared at his arm. It was perfectly intact. If anything, the sphere had only shown a mind-bending cross-section of his arms.

"Did it *hurt*?"

"Not at all. It felt tingly."

Drepno stood up and braced himself. Now, he felt more than ready to enter the portal-like sphere. He wanted to explore wherever this warping orb of sorts took them. As he stared into it, he placed both his arms into the sphere.

He felt *nothing*. Though his view revealed a rather gruesome cross-section of his arms, he felt his arms as they were usually felt.

That was when the *revelation* hit him; "This isn't just some strange sphere. It's a portal— an entry point into a dimension higher than ours."

"The *4th.*"

Drepno turned back to look at the man. He understood what he was saying. These sets of spheres in the redzone could serve as an entry into an entirely new fold of space, if you could even call it that. It would be an entrance to the *4th dimension*. Much like how blowing a bubble onto a flattened piece of plastic allows life on the plastic to go above its plane, this sphere was nothing but a little bubble to those accustomed to the fourth dimension.

Drepno took a deep breath to calm himself, before plunging into the sphere.

OPENING EXCERPT…

Loaded: Description and Discovery of the 4th
Author: Lujkas Lino
(SECTION ONE PARAGRAPH ONE)

The Fourth (short for the Fourth Dimension), was a rather strange place to entail. Drepno's encounter, and possibly the first documented entrance of humanity into the Fourth, revealed many revelations to those who lived at Base Astral, and eventually, the rest of humankind. In Drepno's first minutes on the plane of the Fourth dimension, he described it as an 'opening' sensation. Though overseers struggled to comprehend the recorded footage of the Fourth, Drepno's descriptions aided them into a better understanding. With the concluded view, scientists had managed to reach a true answer. Almost all the mathematical and quantum-physical theories of a spatial Fourth Dimension and its possibilities were *true.* There *was,* indeed, a Fourth Dimension that saw the Third Dimension (ours) the same way we would see a drawing on paper, or the second dimension, with all its pieces and its bits spread out for it's observers to see.

As Drepno entered the Fourth, he was met with a view of Astral he'd never seen before. In this dimension, he saw beyond the halls of the base. He saw the completely-spread body of the man he walked next to, along with the completely spread-out formation of every object around him. He saw every formation and corner of every underground rock covering *Astral*. If there was a clay jar nearby, he'd easily see anything inside of it, along with every intricate corner of the jar itself.

Noticing how the Fourth to Drepno was just an iteration of the Third Dimensional world, he took off his helmet against the orders of the Overseers. Drepno attempted to take in a deep breath, even though he was technically phasing through underground rock.

"I… I can breathe."

He tried waving at the gruesome depiction of the man in this new plane of existence, but it seemed as if he didn't see him. That was when Drepno realized that this new fabric of space worked far differently than he'd expect. While the man in the Third perceived Drepno as being inside of the sphere, Drepno now saw that same sphere as an entry point into a grand dimension; one that would make anybody feel claustrophobic after returning from it. While the man only saw a fold of the plane, Drepno saw above it, alongside every other portion. Drepno's curiosity got the best of him, and he poked what appeared to be a layer of the man's skin. The man let out a small groan of pain before swatting the air, thinking that something in it caused his pain.

So I can interact with the objects of the Third. Haha… Drepno began realizing the possibilities he may have in this altered reality when the man's desperate swats ended up knocking him out of the Fourth. In a rather nauseating experience, Drepno felt himself slip out of the *All-Seeing* state and back into the Third Dimension he was used to. As he fell, the last thing that Drepno saw in the Fourth was the view of the man's face inside the helmet. He noticed the distanced, expanded pieces of red hair resting on what appeared to be the man's head. The slight distancing revealed it was a red-colored eyebrow with, of all things, a *slit* between one of them. The man that had been following him was secretly Rionar.

As Drepno hit the floor and fell from what appeared to be thin air (from Rionar's perspective), Rionar backed away.

"What the-"

Drepno stood up, his face slightly dusty from moving through Martian rock. He attempted to control himself to avoid revealing the fact that he knew who the man behind the suit was, and said, "The fourth is… is something alright."

Rionar's eyes widened.

Distant clapping and chattering could be heard from the radio at his waist. Rionar slowly approached the warped entrance into the Fourth, and peered inside of it. He immediately took his head back out, and stared at Drepno as if he'd seen the incomprehensible answers to the universe's questions.

OPENING EXCERPT…

Loaded: Description and Discovery of the 4th
(SECTION ONE PARAGRAPH TWO)

Though the Fourth itself had no direct impacts on human health, its sheer generosity in scale would leave mental changes on those who'd enter it. Drepno, along with future members of Base Astral's research and military team, had reported sensations of intense claustrophobia after returning from the Fourth. The ability to see and interact with almost everything around them had been (expectedly) removed from them once they returned to the Third, as they then become part of the dimensional fold they belong in. Everything seemed much "smaller" to them once they got back. Such a shift in power has driven some insane, though most of

those who visit the Fourth can easily overcome this side-effect through sheer exposure to the Fourth, or avoiding visiting the Fourth at all.

25

Visions

Two days and a half after the Gas Extermination System was initiated

"The Catalyst. That's what they called the collapse of the Grand Unionar."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Xi had spent her past few hours drifting in and out of sleep as she attempted to recuperate. The freedom of space in the ship's hull made sleeping easier, but occasionally, she'd bump into a dusty corner or two. That was expected, however; the dreams she'd have weren't expected. Throughout each sleep session Xi would fall into, or even the miniscule blinking of eyes, similar events would occur, each leading to the same, convoluted conclusion; *foreign thoughts from the inner workings of dreams. Something is attempting to speak to me through my mind. They want me to know something.*

Laura and a few others had been making smaller expeditions around the hull, managing to find a lost group of students or two. Overall, the small post had managed to build up to twenty people, consisting of students and low-ranking personnel alike.

This was not important. At least, it wasn't important to Xi. Throughout the plentiful hours since her first dream, Xi had eventually gotten used to them, allowing them to pass through her. Each dream, bearing its same message and encounter, Xi would prioritize understanding what this *foreign thought* was attempting to convey. In each one, she felt *experiences* that she could not put words into. Xi felt the coming and going of whatever, or rather, whoever, as it spoke through thoughts.

When she awakened from her most recent dream, she realized something was off. As she stared into one of the curved, dust-filled walls she had awoken next to, she could *feel* the pressing thoughts from this strange entity, even though she was completely awake. She brushed it off.

Grabbing onto the clumps of dust on the walls, Xi clumsily guided herself back to the central area of the small post as her pores filled with

sweat. Once she arrived, she was met with Laura and the most recent expedition group she'd gone out with. Once Laura noticed her, she made her way, temporarily separating herself from the rest of the group.

"Xi," Laura whispered.

Xi nodded, ignoring Laura's concerned face. The two embraced each other in a hug midair, but as the hug finished, she saw Xi's eyebags.

"You haven't rested?"

"I— I have."

"What happened?"

"It's hard to explain. That message from earlier; do you remember?"

Laura nodded, repeating the phrase word for word.

"Dreaming is a form of inner communication, a message from the depths."

Just as Laura had said the phrase, Xi's head and eyes went flying back. The phrase was a trigger. Laura backed away to her group in surprise, all watching Xi's convulsing body in *horror.* These convulsions sent her body tilting and turning in odd directions, as Xi began *communication.*

Hello, Xi Lin. I can't wait to assist your civilization.

Who are you.

No need for a harsh attitude. I am an unidentifiable being. Rather, one you can't understand, or simply put a name to. One from what would be considered the Fifth, in your standards at least.

What do you want? I can't control my body, give it back!

Xi was completely aware of how this conversation may have looked to onlookers. She knew her body was convulsing. This was but a mere

conversation with her mind, this strange being operating a small portion of it.

This convulsion of your body is but a mere smear in a straight line to me. It was not my doing. You are being overwhelmed by maintaining a conversation with a being dimensions higher than you, but do not worry, for I intend this conversation to be short. Though I had wished to warn your kind of everything this universe encapsulates and hides, I am certain it will kill you if I told you. Therefore, I will make this conversation quick, and hope you pick up these warnings along your way.

Silence followed. The entity decided this was a sign that she was willing to listen to what it offered. The 5th-dimensional being knew it'd have to speed this conversation, as each second of it required increasing portions of Xi's mind, stretching her limits.

I am dying. Many like me are. Some have accepted their fate. I have not. We possess the ability to view into the minds of those in your world; the varying life forms of the third dimension. Though many do it temporarily, I wish to have permanent residence in that mind of yours. I must hide. In the fourth, we see them as they see you. The Others are killing us off one at a time, and soon, they will come for your species if they feel like it. Out of many others I've seen, It seems like you have the most sufficient mind capacity. Please accept my entrance into your mind.

Xi's body tensed mid-air.

Why should I? Can I deny?

You can deny, and I will leave you be. But you wouldn't want to.

Why not?

I can see not only into your mind but into the world around you. As you move and exist, I can warn your being of threats nearby, and the way you should approach them. You forget I see your world as small blimps; nothing but a thin, readable line.

There's no way-

There are five maintenance employees of higher rank breaking into the nearest vent. They do not yet know of the existence of other survivors in the hull, but if action isn't taken quickly via your warning, you, and all your friends will surely face death. This is a warning.

Silence. The being took this as an opportunity to continue speaking.

Once I leave your mind, I am afraid I cannot come back; alive, at least. If I leave now, any memory of my messages will be forgotten, including this conversation and-

The warning.

Yes. The warning. However, with my help, the two of us can lead each other to survival. All I need is your consciousness to accept. Will you allow it?

What seemed like hours of decision-making within Xi's mind was nothing but mere seconds for Laura and the others, watching as Xi's shaking slowly calmed, tensing and loosening faster by the second.

I accept.

Xi's tensing body returned to a calmness. Laura noticed her fingers moving. With the shift of an eyelid, Xi's pupils rolled back into view, along with her consciousness. The deal had been made. As Xi felt the movement of her body once more, she felt a strange weight of sorts in her mind.

Laura's eyes widened.

"X-Xi..."

Xi kicked herself off a wall and jumped toward Laura. The two hugged once more, as Xi cried in her embrace.

"I don't know *what's* happening to me..." cried out Xi, tears running down her already tear-stained face.

As the two continued hugging, Xi remembered the warning.

"*Where* is the nearest vent?", yelled Xi, as she pushed herself away from the hug.

"What-"

"I don't have time to explain! Get as many people as you can and tell them to bring weapons to the nearest vent!"

Laura nodded, and flew across the center, yelling "Follow me with your weapons! Danger ahead!"

Xi's eyes rolled back uncontrollably.

They've opened the entrance to the vent. They will arrive at the vent's exit in a guaranteed ten minutes.

As her eyes rolled back into view, she nodded, aware of the being in her mind. From here on out, this entity of sorts would live inside Xi's head as a place of refuge. In return, it'd help her navigate the world around her, adding a sixth sense of sorts.

My thoughts are no longer alone.

Xi waited for a response, and almost felt relief until she *felt* the foreign thought once more.

They aren't.

26

Raid

GUH Base *Minor*, seventy miles south of Base Astral

"The various Cariveer military divisions of the Valles Marineris Canyons are all known for their adaptability to weather and combat. However, one stands out the most in this skill—Division 14, known for specializing in melee combat. Though this division is mostly used for 'decorative' purposes, their "Slasher" subdivision is considered the strongest across all of Mars."

-Map of Mars; a description of the Southern Canyons.

It was pre-dawn by the time of the attack. Two Martian National Guards stood at stance, heavy, black clad armor on their bodies, limiting

their movements. The base they guarded, in question, was Base *Minor*, a small supply outpost. The outpost itself was a wide, dome-like structure. The two guards stood in front of its main gates, wearing full, black, and bulky bodysuits with an intricate structure, separating their bodies from the outside world. If anything, these suits made the GUH troopers appear like dark, humanoid insects.

"Insulated visors. These guards are new," whispered Krinth to Advisor Jezra Falkner, a dark-skinned man with short dreadlocks. Jezra had been another one of the five chosen from the apartment raid, selected for his fighting and strategy skill sets. The two stared at the small base from a distant sandstone cliff. As they lay above the cliff face, sharing binoculars, Jezra responded.

"How so?"

"Look at the back of their suits," pointed Krinth. "There is a fine layer of tubing. They aren't used to the air here— or rather, the lack of. They are also using thermal gear. They've been doing the night shift. Must be tired."

Jezra increased the focus on the binoculars, nodded.

"If they are off-worlders, new to the cold desert, they should be easy to kill, right?"

Krinth nodded, a smirk forming on the sides of his lips, "Indeed, they should be. We won't have to worry about that, though."

As Guardsman Herdon stared across the desert plane, noticing the distant cliff or two, he yawned. The dark, face-covering helmet reflected the humidity of his breath back onto him. A small rifle at hand, he turned to

look at his colleague, Gefund, his dark visor also covering the entirety of his head.

"We have only a few minutes until our shift ends."

Gefund nodded, spoke through the microphone in his helmet. "Yes. Can't wait to be back inside. This suit scratches every bit of me..."

With the view of each other's faces being blocked by a black visor, each movement and phrase seemed robotic. In the distance, the rumble of multiple engines could be heard. Herdon listened closely. These engines weren't of Unionar manufacture. Others were near, presumably hostile.

"Gefund, do you hear that?"

Gefund joined in, listening. The distant revving *was* foreign. Being the ex-mechanic he was, Gefund easily picked up on which model produced this noise.

"*Humvees*. Humvees! Prepare for contact!"

Herdon raised his weapon, scanning the now purple horizon. Gefund raised his hand, motioning for him to stop.

"I'll go."

As Gefund walked at guard stance, breathing heavily with each step, a groan could be heard over his helmet communicator.

"My head hurts-"

With the drop of his weapon, Gefund fell dead onto the ground.

"Gefund!" Herdon ran as fast as his bulky suit allowed him to. Herdon flipped Gefund's body head facing up, and broke his visor, letting out a hiss of air. With a look inside Gefund's visor, it appeared as if nothing happened to him. He backed away in not only awe, but *fear. What— what happened to him.* By the time he backed away from the body, it was too late.

Herdon felt a pulsating pain in his head.

He could feel his vision collapsing with each second. He felt the grip on his weapon dwindling. As he dropped his weapon, he collapsed to the ground, stuttering and drooling at the mouth. His last vision was that of a hand reaching through his visor.

'Brain Plucker' Drepno rubbed his hands on his shirt as he walked through the Fourth. *Ew. I grabbed his eye.* This attack on the supply outpost was one Drepno was spearheading. Being one of the few that could navigate the Fourth, he could easily slide his hands into any corner of a person, including their brain. As he stopped probing Herdon's head, he watched the spread-out figure fall to the floor. With that, an alarm was signaled throughout the outpost.

OPENING EXCERPT…
Loaded: Description and Discovery of the 4th
(SECTION FOUR PARAGRAPH ONE-THREE: Uses of the Fourth.)

The Fourth, being a place in which our world appeared to be beyond visible, came with its uses. A person in the Fourth, being able to see everything in everything, could also interact with it. Signs of this were shown. In the earlier days of the redzone's discovery, it was seen that small rocks were oftentimes stuck between the layered walls of the base. Somehow, these rocks, with origins of being right outside the base's walls, had phased through the Fourth and back into the Third, finding its phased position between the walls it could once go through. Regardless of the

investigation conducted, no conclusion was reached at first. However, after Drepno had first entered, further tests were conducted alongside his experiences.

One of these tests was named 'Pig Brain'. This experiment's name was quite easy to decipher, as its purpose was to see the extent of power those in the Fourth had over living beings. As you may assume, a pig was used in this experiment. The goal was to get Drepno to use the Fourth in order to put a pig to 'sleep' via removal of a certain portion of its brain.

By the time Drepno had returned from his trip into the Fourth, the pig had lost all vitals. When the overseers approached Drepno, he pulled out a pouch, with visible signs of disgust on his face. Inside such a pouch were the pieces of the pig's brain that Drepno had been instructed to return with. Drepno had further explained this as plucking a feather from a bird, as all parts of the pig were revealed to him in the Fourth. All he had to do was pluck out the brain.

Drepno turned behind him, saw the shifting patterns of what appeared to be Humvees. *Krinth's team is now moving. I must unlock the gates.* Drepno walked into the thick bulk that was the base's mechanical gate, and took out the needed gears. Almost as if magic, the entrance gates to the outpost slid open. To the onlookers in the Third, this would've looked as if the gates unlocked themselves open. In actuality, a gear just managed to slip into a fold of space not visible.

Krinth drove the leading Humvee, with Jezra at his side passenger seat. Jezra was awe-struck. Krinth hadn't explained Drepno's part in the operation to him, so it very much scared him when he saw the two guards

from earlier collapse onto the ground without any reason. As the group of Humvees made a final turn alongside red hills, the view of the base was revealed once more, alongside the eroded path leading to it.

Inside the massive, white, dome-like structure, klaxon alarms blared. The outpost crew had awoken to the hue of a blaring red beaming across their sleeping corridors, as backup lights turned on. The halls filled with men awakening from their sleep, each running to their defensive sections. In the control room, soldiers worked their asses off, attempting to figure out what had triggered the alarm system. One of these people, Rauthen, stared intensely at the camera footage. He watched the unwinding pattern of the gates open without any intervention.

Almost as if perfectly timed, all lights and energy were cut, even the back-ups. The control room fell silent with the few sounds being that of the occasional steps. As Rauthen looked around the pitch black room, sensing the confusion in the group, he felt a miserable pain in his head.

"Arrgh!"

With a loud thud, Rauthen's head collapsed on the command room's table. One of the soldiers in the room pulled out a flashlight, and shined it in the direction of the thud— found Rauthen's lifeless body on a chair. In horror, the others approached the lifeless body. As the man poked him with the flashlight, he realized that whatever killed the two guards, killed Rauthen.

"It's here."

One of the soldiers approached him and said, "What is-"

The man dropped his flashlight onto the floor, and along with it, his body. Now, panic was setting in. The room went back into its pitch dark

state, as the soldiers scrambled in horror, each dropping like flies, one at a time.

Near the inner entrance gates of the dome, the newly awakened soldiers and crew ran to their armory and suited themselves according to their military status. As the red lights produced by the back-up generator went off, each person grabbed a small flashlight and attached it to their helmets.

The Humvees drove into the entrance while the soldiers prepared to face what they thought was somehow killing them off. Krinth and an army of thirty desert-trained men awaited near the inner entrance gate to inside the dome, still locked and tightly shut. Krinth leaned into the gate and heard the frantic shuffling of GUH troops as they got into fighting position.

A man desperately squeezed himself through the crowd of soldiers and other personnel as he attempted to get into position. After a minute of shuffling, the hall fell into silence, as each person raised their weapons at waist height, and had their flashlights illuminate the person in front of them. Clangs upstairs could be heard, followed by the sounds of desperate movements and yelling. *The command room*, thought the man. *How could they get up there*— without any time to think, he felt the thud of a soldier not too far behind him, followed by the chaotic scattering of light as the soldiers broke their position in confusion.

Frantic yelling ensued, as each person looked around themselves, attempting to find the source of death. With a loud explosion, the gate they so desperately attempted to defend collapsed, falling on two of the soldiers in front of the man. In the middle of the chaos, the man looked in front of

him, saw Krinth menacingly staring, his locked hair flying with the wind that flew out of the now decompressed dome. He looked below his face, saw Krinth's rifle pointed at him. In pure terror, he turned towards the inside of the dome and saw his friends falling dead without any explainable reason.

I've lived a good life.

The man considered firing, but realized it was useless. He dropped his weapons, and spanned his arms. Krinth, alongside the other Seekers, opened fire on the remaining soldiers. Several bullets had pierced the man by then, but he didn't feel them; he was already dead, a small portion of his brain plucked out by Drepno before the bullets hit him. The man fell on his knees, before collapsing onto the ground, being one of the last to fall to the raiders.

Krinth entered the halls first, surveying each corner while aiming down at the littered bodies. As he moved, he oftentimes stepped on a leg or waist— the hallways were filled with bodies. Jezra and some of the other uninformed Seeker soldiers looked around in confusion as to how the GUH troops had fallen so easily. This attack was meant to strike the GUH at its least prepared. Krinth made a knocking sound on the metal walls of the hall, along with a range of guttural vocalizations.

On cue, Drepno came falling from the ceiling— he left the Fourth. The Seeker backed away from him.

Jezra backed away before saying, "What the-"

Krinth turned to look at Jezra, a smirk on his face, "This is Drepno, another one of the 'Chosen Five'."

"Yes— I know who he is. But why is he here and how-"

Krinth raised his palms as a stopping gesture "I know that *half* of us have many questions."

The Seeker soldiers turned to look at each other

"The other half, me included, will explain once we get back to Astral."

Drepno looked at his hands as he got on his feet. They were dirty with bits of mangled cerebrums, along with blood from some of the times he missed and hit a large vein instead. And the yelling; it was stuck in his head. Though it was hard to tell what was happening through the view of the Fourth, it wasn't mistakable. The men he killed faced something they could not comprehend. It almost made Drepno feel bad for them.

Eventually, after an hour of scavenging Base Minor for supplies, weapons, and remaining Unionar soldiers, Krinth had ordered the rapid loading of said supplies onto the Humvees. They had to be quick if they wished to avoid the incoming Martian National Guard. As a matter of fact, they should've arrived by then. Something was far more important to be holding them back like this. Drepno ran to the front Humvee and sat in the back passenger seat with another Seeker rifleman.

Drepno sat there, contemplating his actions, before concluding; *it was necessary.* He looked at the rifleman, compared his current state with the soldier's, and came to a realization. Throughout all this time, he'd become one of them. Earlier, he had seen them as dirty, but now, he himself was dirty.

The Humvees took off, but this time, it was in a rather different pattern. No Humvee, out of the dozens who had arrived, took the eroded path from earlier. Each one sprawled out and took a different path, each in pairs of two. Looking out the window, Drepno thought, *diversion. We are*

attempting to disappear from possible reinforcements. As he zoned off, staring at the flat highlands of the Arabia Terra region illuminated by the morning sun, he noticed a set of distant dots in the sky. He squinted.

Iron Hawks.

"Stop the vehicle! Stop the others, too! Iron Hawks coming from the south!"

Krinth slammed his foot on the brake pedal, inertia causing Drepno to bump his head on the front seat. Krinth attempted to send a radio signal to the Humvee behind him, but it was too late once they stopped. The Iron Hawk formation had likely identified the electromagnetic sources. Krinth sat with his head down, praying that they hadn't detected them. The desert landscape was filled with a desolate silence as the vehicles went quiet. In the distance, cloudy shadows of the drones and planes above could be seen moving at incredible speeds.

As the row of Iron Hawks moved closer above, the sounds of the Martian desert landscape fell into a strange silence, along with its young desert life. Krinth's knuckles whitened as he clenched the steering wheel in anxiety. He closed his eyes and waited. A minute passed in this odd silence. *This is taking too long... they should've killed us by now.*

Much like the sound of relief, the radio speaker turned on.

"Humvee #2 of Krinth's section, we are in the clear. The planes flew past us, over."

Visible relief could be seen coming from Jezra and Krinth, as they stared out into the desolate, red landscape. Drepno slid seats to the middle to see the formation of planes continuing northward.

Krinth turned on his radio's microphone to speak, and said "What of the other Humvee groups further north?"

"The planes flew right past them. Their engines seemed to have been off by then-"

"They weren't. At least, most of them," interrupted Drepno, opening his mouth to speak.

Everyone in the Humvee, including the rifleman, turned to face him.

"I can't explain it, but I know that we turned off our engines late, even if it was by a second or two. Even then, that radio transmission we just got would've been more than enough for them to classify us as a threat. They didn't come here for us. They flew right past us. Something major is happening up north. Too important for them to bother with us."

Krinth considered this for a second. He then said, "Base Astral?"

"Or Galgoria."

With a nod, he then turned on the radio to speak, saying "Continue on planned paths. Estimated travel time to Astral is three-and-a-half hours-"

Frantic yelling was heard over the radio. Krinth placed both his shaking hands on the radio in a nervous manner. "*What*— what's happening?"

A distant voice could be heard through the radio, going in and out. "We've received… from— signal… NCC! It— document! Reroute… Base Brona! One mile south of Galgoria!"

Krinth dropped the radio in his hands and turned to face the others.

"The crew member from the NCC has sent a message… They responded! The classified information! It is public now!"

Drepno's eyes widened. *It happened. The cataclysmic event. It's happening! The Unionar's documents are out there now. They've been leaked—* Drepno's train of thought was interrupted, as the soldier next to him put him in a celebration headlock, gave him a nookie, and yelled, "We've done it!"

Drepno watched in deep thought as Krinth spoke to him.

"Looks like we will be rerouting to Base Brona," a smirk appearing on his face in accomplishment of the feat they had done.

"Rerouting southernmost Humvee group farther north to the cliff-face Base Brona, " said Krinth as he spoke into the radio. Change was coming.

27

Retrograde

Eight hours earlier.

"During the start of The Catalyst Event, Matthew Knowles made his final announcement to the world. Shortly after he expressed the lengths of protecting the ones we love most, he shot himself on live television. He didn't want to see what would happen to us next."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

The distant view of the NCC could be seen from Matteos' windows. With a telescope, or some heavily focused squinting, the complex, maze-like formation of gravity-independent halls could be seen, their crossing formations creating a black smudge above Jupiter. Even then, the station was but a microscopic dot when compared to the orange, gaseous mass behind it. Even now, as Matteos' shuttle was a wide distance away from Jupiter, it still made up a large amount of the view beyond the shuttle's windows.

For the past few minutes, EXO had used the shuttle's remaining fuel on Veloscale Four speed and had reached a moderate distance from the NCC. Even as the shuttle's main functions slowly went out due to a lack of energy, EXO carefully managed its resources in order to drive the shuttle closer towards an entrance of the NCC. Being back in space, Matteos still felt that rush of exploration. Not only that, but he felt moderately stronger, as even the lightest of gravity on an average moon put decent pressure on his muscles and bones. As the shuttle turned by a tiny increment, the Sun's light filled the dark cabin, illuminating Matteos' face.

Matteos stared out into the NCC with a face of deathly determination. Small creases formed below his eyes, where trauma was shown through eyebags. *My old prison. The Unionar will regret creating me.* Matteos' thought process was interrupted when the shuttle went on its final Veloscale Four drive using its remaining energy. With a massive blast of g-force, Matteos' head slammed on his seat's headrest. He was used to this new force, especially after his unwelcome visit to Europa.

As the view of dark, crossing halls that met intersections grew, a faint voice could be heard from the dwindling battery of the shuttle's receiver.

"This is NCC operator… Please identify…"

The NCC doesn't have any external defenses. They don't expect a foreign intruder. Their only defense would be the particles that those Solar System walls shoot out. That'd be too risky, though. They wouldn't want to hit the NCC by accident, would they…

Once the rapid clicking and hissing of the station's airlock system began, EXO quickly began shaping itself into a more combat-ready stance. It appeared to shift into the similar vein-like structure, only this time

operating without a host. EXO almost appeared humanoid in this form. Noticing Matteos' heightened blood pressure, it spoke over the shuttle's faltering speakers, using up all of the shuttle's energy.

"Do not be afraid. We will publicize those remaining documents, and get out of here."

"What then?"

The lights went off once EXO started speaking.

"The rest of the Solar System remains for us."

It continued, now switching over to its mobile battery system.

"We will explore it together, parent and son."

Matteos shed a tear in his left eye, as his knuckles turned white. Below his waist, he gripped a small pocket knife he had found in the thermal tent kit. Though it was small, it was adorned with intricate patterns. *Circles. Many of them.* These circles in question were the orbits of Jupiter's moons, from the Galilean moons to small Retrograde asteroids. *A map of Jupiter's System.*

EXO stood in front of him, and asked, "Are you ready?"

With a nod, the shuttle's circular door shifted. Though Matteos' vision was blocked by EXO's stance, he managed to hear the voices of what seemed to be two confused guards.

"Identify yourself! What the hell *are* you-"

Before one of the guards could finish his sentence, the sound of various stabs could be heard, followed by screaming from both guards. Matteos instantly looked over EXO and saw two pools of blood forming around the waists of the guards. Looking at what had stabbed them,

Matteos saw EXOs same, vein-like arms gouging into the guards, one arm inside of each guard's ribcage.

EXO pulled out its blood-stained arms from the guards. Matteos widened his eyes in the shock of gore, watching as blood particles sprinkled the air.

EXO could do that?

Matteos continued staring at the floating bodies of the guards in front of them. As he stared, he remembered why he went to the station in the first place.

Revenge comes at a cost. We did not want to kill those guards, but they wouldn't let us through. What happens now and after is for the good of everyone. My revenge. My revenge... No, everyone's freedom.

"We must keep moving."

Matteos nodded, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Within a few seconds of thought, he had concluded that he'd do anything, anything to get back at the terrible life he had been given.

The pair cleared hall after hall, avoiding any sectors with too many signs of life. They had to avoid guards. More or so, they wanted to avoid killing them. By the time they had stepped into the radio transmission sector, where Kilnos had worked alongside Matteos and others, klaxon alarms blared, and the dark-orange hue of the NCC blared into a burning red once more. Matteos remembered these transmission halls. He remembered the red that filled the halls when he realized the truth behind his purpose at the NCC. *Manipulative rats.* Most of all, he remembered the burning pain of losing a man you knew like a brother. *All for what?*

Matteos opened his mouth to speak as the two looked at the room-filled corridor they had filed into. "Guards are coming from all sectors of the NCC. It's a level-three alarm. The whole station is on lockdown-"

"Do you remember Kilnos' room, Matteos?"

"Yes."

Matteos pulled himself through the wide corridor until he found the entrance to Kilnos' transmission room. As he looked into the door, he saw the observation room through a small glass panel welded onto it. The size of Jupiter consumed the panel's view; a wide assortment of orange and gray colors. He placed his finger on the print-scanner of Kilnos' room, and felt the oncoming memories of his time with him. Matteos had almost brought himself to tears but recollected himself within several seconds.

"We need a fingerprint. Even then, the door is on lockdown, so-"

EXO rammed its arms into the sliding door and began drilling into it. "We don't have much time. Guards are nearing our sector. Many of them."

As it drilled through the deck's door, the vibrating sound of its arms tensing now and then when EXO overheated, Matteos noticed that something was happening to it. Its speech blurred out every once in a while as it spoke to him. *EXO's on low battery.* Before Matteos could address his concern, it kicked the door into Kilnos' old room, sending it flying towards a thick glass wall.

Matteos entered the room and noticed it was in its clean, original form. *They moved somebody new here. Wait— the NCC is on lockdown.*

Matteos opened his mouth to speak.

"Somebody is in here-"

Almost immediately, a dark, red silhouette charged at him, and knocked him off of stability in the center of the room.

"Argh!" yelled Matteos, as the two flew into a wall, slamming both of their sides.

As the two spun around the room, with EXO attempting to find the message on the display panel, the room's red lights slowly illuminated both of their faces. The man was Alazar, one of Kilnos' older colleagues. He'd been promoted after Kilnos' death. As Alazar looked back at Matteos, he opened his eyes in realization. *Matteos?* Unfortunately, by the time Alazar had realized who he was attempting to stop, Matteos had already formed a decision. Matteos pulled out his knife as the two spun frantically, and jabbed it into Alazar's neck. Just then, he felt Alazar's grip on him loosen.

During the slowing of the spin they had entangled themselves in, Matteos watched in sadness as the life faded away from Alazar's eyes. *He didn't realize it was me until it was too late. And I didn't realize it was him. Why do we become unrecognizable?* Matteos frantically pulled the knife away and pushed himself off Alazar's body. *I killed a man... it was within my control this time.*

I'm a murderer.

Matteos closed his eyes and shook his head, before jumping to the display. On the panel, EXO had managed to pull up the transmission document between Kilnos and the Osiren crew. *They didn't bring it back to its deletion state. They didn't realize I restored the document.*

Matteos grinned as he looked through the document, realizing that this *was* indeed the file he saw the last time he was here. He read the final

parts of the transmission. His smile faded as he remembered. *How— how could he?*

"Kilnos had no choice," said EXO, as if it could see through Matteos' mind.

"But I do. We do."

EXO lowered its head in agreement, and with the push of a digital button, the document was encrypted with the Unionar's stamp of approval and sent across all sectors of the NCC, as well as every ship and planetary transmitter within three billion kilometers; almost all of the Solar System. Since the high-ranking transmission rooms were of great power, there were various radio transmitters across the sector that he could use to send and authorize the same message across thousands of locations, each transmission with the official GUH stamp.

The heavy humming of the various transmission processes took place, and as such happened, Matteos could already hear the effect of what he'd done. Various screams could be heard across distant NCC halls, as others read through affirmed transmissions in a loss of identity. Many, in this similar craze Matteos had when he'd become lost in *everything*, attempted breaking out of their rooms. Some managed to break their locked doors, while others decided to spread out the document further, sending transmissions in scattered formations, one send at a time.

Humming was heard aboard *all* of the NCC now.

Matteos kicked himself off the orange-tinted glass panel behind him and slowly flowed towards the exit. Just as he neared the door, a guard appeared on the other end, aiming his laser pistol at his head.

"Stay in your rooms— or.. or I will shoot!"

He hasn't seen EXO yet. He doesn't know I am the foreign attacker.

The guard peered over and saw EXO and its uncanny, veiny, human-like appearance. His eyes widened in realization, but by the time he realized, two of (what were) Matteos' co-workers charged at him from the right side of the hall, causing them to spin in tight, zero-gravity combat.

"Now is our chance. Let's move, now!"

Matteos nodded and flew out the doorway with EXO. As they moved through the dark, disorienting halls of the now-chaotic NCC, they could hear various clangs and explosions in the most distant sectors. *Everything is at a breaking point.* Hearing the familiar sound of a sector detaching from the main station, he looked out the small windows of the corridor he was in and saw the other, dark corridors, all contrasted by the bright haze of Jupiter's surface behind it and the empty void of space on its side. Suddenly, he was blinded. A massive explosion rocked the station, and as he gained clarity on what was happening, he noticed that an intersection only a few turns away had imploded on itself due to improper pressurization. Matteos watched in terror, as shards of metal went flying across space without any air resistance.

The scene was disorienting. The heavy blaring of alarms and red lights, followed by the sounds of rebellion could drive one insane after a while. As he stared, a shard immediately flew towards his window, forming a small crack in it. He backed away in fear.

Matteos heard EXO's voice, pleading for him.

"We don't have time! Hurry! Please! They'll steal our shuttle!"

With a nod, he continued following EXO. After passing through several floating bodies, and making four alternate paths due to blown

intersections, they had reached the desolate corner of the NCC where the shuttle had been stationed. Matteos quickly flew into the shuttle and activated all flight parameters.

“EXO, are you ready?” The continuous connection between the parked shuttle and the NCC while they had been away allowed it to charge up, so it gained a decent amount of energy. However, it wasn't enough.

“EXO, I said, are you ready-”

A large error text appeared on the screen in front of him;

INSUFFICIENT FUEL

Matteos’ eyes widened in surprise and fear. He didn’t want to be in the NCC any longer than he already was. *Too many memories.* He looked behind him— saw that EXO was still outside the shuttle.

“Get in-” he looked to the side and saw EXO’s outstretched arms spanning across the airlock entry.

“EXO? EXO, what are you doing?”

EXO lifted its head and stared at Matteos.

“The NCC will implode on itself at any moment, *you* need to get out of here.”

“But there is not enough power for even Veloscale Three-” Matteos looked at EXO’s right arm, stretched into the charging connection of the shuttle's airlock entrance. With an outburst of power, EXO sent thousands of volts flowing into the shuttle’s port; its last remaining portions of energy.

“EXO, stop what you’re doing!”

EXO responded in a burst of voice, enough to shake the nearby intersections. “Stay— stay… b-back!”

Matteos couldn't do anything but watch. With a final burst of power, EXO yelled out its last commands into the shuttle's systems.

"Close… airlock. Veloscale Three, activate. Location; I— Io."

However, its final words were not commands. They were more than a few lines of systematic code; far more than that.

"I'll miss you, Matteos. I raised you well."

With the slam of a button, EXO closed the airlock door. Jumping to the airlock door, Matteos slammed it with his fists as hard as he could. Using EXO's remaining energy, the shuttle's systems activated with astounding force, pushing the ship thousands of meters away from the NCC's center. Matteos yelled. He yelled and cried, as his hands banged against the shuttle's transparent airlock windows. He'd never cried this loudly; not when he realized what the Unionar had done, not when he killed his closest friend with his hands, not when he found out he was a forgotten experiment— a guinea pig gone rotten.

With a glass-shattering boom, he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Exo… Don't leave me!"

Matteos' mouth began spewing drool from the yelling and crying, but that didn't stop him. Nothing would, not even death.

"Come back! Come-" Matteos swallowed his tightened throat "Come back!"

He continued wailing, as he pleaded EXO's name in excruciating pain. Thirty whole minutes had passed, and the station was still in clear sight, though smaller than earlier. Matteos was still screaming, his nose now leaking from the rush of tears.

Just as he had finally wiped his tears, and began to think deeply about what EXO had just done for him, he saw a bright flash of light in the distance. The entirety of the NCC had imploded on itself, and the debris had sparked chemical reactions in the nuclear drives of other shuttles.

"No— it can't be— Exo… EXO!"

Matteos placed his head on the airlock's windows and continued screaming, only that this time, all that could be heard was a continuous, faint gasp; Matteos' lungs couldn't bear the crying anymore, but he could. The pool of water near his eyes had grown so much that Matteos felt as if he was underwater. *Drowning.*

Exo didn't have to leave, not like this.

Though Matteos' eyes were closed at this certain moment in time, there was another distant light near Jupiter. It wasn't the NCC, nor another shuttle. It was a *ship*, and it was heading towards Jupiter's surface, reflecting the sunlight that hit it.

Loss

Three hours earlier.

"Shortly after the collapse of the GUH, the once black buildings of Galgoria accumulated dust, turning them a dusty red and yellow. The groups on Mars and the people that remained after the disaster were under a ticking time bomb to leave the planet; without GUH administrations, supplies were scarce, and the habitability of the equator was lowering each year."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

Shortly after the warning, the being's claim was confirmed. Xi, alongside Laura's party, spotted a group of maintenance crew members cramming out of the tight vent exit. They killed the maintenance team as they climbed out, one at a time. By the time all five of the crew members were killed, Laura made sure that no other crew member was watching from within the maintenance vent.

Xi's eyes rolled behind her head as she conversed with something within her. She then opened her mouth to speak.

"They're onto us."

Laura turned her head from the hatch as she heard her.

"What?"

Xi pointed at the body of a maintenance worker. "Look inside their pockets."

Molz pushed himself off a dusty wall and looked into one of the worker's pockets. He reached his hands inside and pulled out a handheld transceiver.

The radio buzzed as somebody spoke over it. “Their vitals are down. Life confirmed.”

Laura’s eyes widened; Xi’s skin crawled with an indescribable chill.

“It was a trap.”

“Xi— How did you know?”

“Visions. I have visions.”

Laura scoffed, but realized that wasn’t the priority at the moment.

Xi spoke, “Listen, I can tell you everything as long as we are safe. We are not. We need to get out of here as soon as humanly possible-”

Xi’s and the rest of her group’s eyesight faded into darkness as a smoke-like gas entered the hull through various vents at high pressures. The group had been right in front of one of the vent’s exits when the smoke came out.

Half an hour later, Xi woke up. Looking around her, she noticed she was in a command room, but this one was different. It was much larger, with over half the room being a clear glass window; a view into a dark void. On the left-most side of the window, a portion of Jupter’s surface could be seen. Though it was a tiny sliver of Jupiter seen through the window, the fact that it covered the entirety of the left-sided portion of the window was enough to display just how close they were to its surface. It reminded her of the observatory room. She tried moving her hands but saw they were cuffed and chained to the room’s curved, dome-like metal floors; around fifteen feet below her.

As more lights and displays activated around her, she realized she wasn’t the only one here. She noticed a few faces, such as Molz, and some

other people she had met in the hull. As more light entered the room via displays, she noticed that all of these captives were also shackled to the curved floor, arranged in a circular pattern. Xi was lined up alongside them; part of the circle as well. Once her eyes adapted to the darkness, she made out the face of the person cuffed next to her; Laura. She was still unconscious.

She looked at the person opposite her side in the circle; saw Marcus staring back at her. *Oh no. They know what he did.*

Why didn't you tell me?

Almost immediately, *it* knew who Xi was talking to.

I did. I told you about the maintenance team, and you took the action of killing them.

No— why didn't you tell me it was a trap?

It wasn't a trap. They had a pulse monitor attached to them as nothing but a safety check. Their deaths were all they needed to confirm suspicion within the hulls.

Why didn't you tell me they had monitors!

Why did you decide to kill them?

I— I— it was the best option... They'd find us.

How were you sure they'd find you if you all had stayed and hid? They could've been going to the opposite side of the hull, far from your 'settlement'. Even I did not know whether they planned to go near your group's area or not.

Tell me, strange being. Why are your primary instincts to hide?

Fighting killed us. We should've hidden while we had the chance.

Xi's trance-like conversation with the being within her mind was cut short when something else caught her attention. The displays in the room

were set to full luminosity and sent up above the circle of captives, resembling a large ceiling light of sorts. Xi, alongside the others lined up next to her, squinted at the sudden light. Laura awakened from her unconsciousness once the displays lit up, and looked around the room once before shedding a tear.

Xi heard the quiet sobbing of others, but heard it all halt abruptly when the doors leading to the command room slid open. Looking past Laura, she saw Thrite, the ship's captain. She shuddered at the sight of the man's clean, white uniform when it was compared to the smudged, dirty, and ruined clothes she and the other captives wore.

Thrite floated into the room with an aura of superiority as other crew members followed behind him. He stopped in the middle of the captive circle. He brushed his brown hair back with his fingers, before staring directly at Xi.

"Ahh— the remaining survivors. To be frank— I don't quite know what to do with you all; I mean, *kill* you all after what you've been through? Sounds too… underwhelming. A bit anticlimactic, even. Well, it's no worries; my plans have changed."

Xi looked up at Thrite, saw him focus his eyes on her. He flew closer to Xi, to the point where he was mere inches away from her face.

"There are a lucky few, however; some of which were never destined to die. As a matter of fact, some of you *were* privileged enough to come home alive, without the need to return in body bags filled with lies surrounding your causes of death."

Laura looked over her shoulders at Xi in concern. "Is he talking about you?"

Even Xi herself didn't know.

Is he?

She felt a strange fury of confusion, sadness, and rage build up within her. As she lowered her head, Trite smiled, knowing she was aware of the fact she was the *one* student not destined to die. Her parents had made yet another deal with the higher-ups. She didn't know whether to thank them or hate them for putting her through everything.

As she raised her head, Thrite expected her face to be full of tear water forming around her eyelids, but instead found a dry, red face staring directly into his soul. Xi spit at his face, the projectile unhindered due to the lack of gravity.

Thrite backed away in disgust and dishonor, wiped away the clotting bits of saliva on his face with his hands. Xi watched in smirking delight, curious as to how badly she must've angered him. Her smile disappeared as he reached into his uniform and pulled out a laser pistol, built to prevent ship damage, and fired it at Marcus. As he moved to the side, Xi saw Marcus' face, motionless, with a gaping hole in his forehead where Thrite had shot him. Looking back at Thrite's now stale face, Xi began to tear up, using the final amounts of water reserves her eyes had.

"Your actions have consequences. Like I said earlier, plans have changed-"

Xi muttered under her breath, but struggled to contain her voice.

"*You... You...* You son of a bitch!"

Thrite's face swelled red mid-speech, as he struggled to contain his anger. He's never had this much disrespect thrown at him. He floated back

to her using a directional guide set to his waist, and slapped Xi across her face before grabbing her head with his hands and yelling at her.

"Listen here… you ungrateful little *shit;* Too much is happening back on Mars and Earth for us to land. The GUH is collapsing-"

Captives and crew members alike both gasped and murmured to each other. Nobody was aware of this other than the captain himself. Discovery's disconnection to the rest of the world did not help, either.

"Yes, the Unionar is *collapsing*! There is nowhere for us to land, and to be frank, I don't think I'd even *want* to. Not even the damn escape pods would save you."

Now, the crew members were concerned. *Is this man insane?* Thrite picked up a remote floating near him and pressed a button on it. Dozens of displays appeared, all showing transmissions between the GUH and Osiren, alongside others with a fate similar to Osiren.

Crew members and captives alike gasped.

"You heard it *all*. I am *tired* of *everything.* Every scandal, every death, every fit of rage!"

Thrite clenched Xi's head harder as his red face stared into her almost painful-to-look-at face, before letting go and speaking to a watch on his arms.

"Discovery systems, reroute ship trajectory and disable system command lock."

The watch spoke back through the ship's internal system speakers.

"Where to?"

"Center of Jupiter at the highest velocity."

The system answered, stuttering as it bypassed its safety guards. "W— understood."

Screams and frantic crying could be heard from those around Xi. Though everybody was tensing up, Xi had forgotten how to *feel*. She just stared, stared out into the chaos as the humming of the ship's systems increased and the ship turned to face Jupiter, the window's view now filled with its sight.

I can't take it anymore. This is how I die?

No, it won't be. I need you to survive. Look at the high ranking crew members. They're in distress, too.

Xi looked at the panicked crew members as they either cried or considered what to do. She stared attentively as the being spoke to her.

They didn't know Thrite planned to do any of this. Everybody in your society blindly trusts... everything. They look at him with terror and confusion now. Now watch what happens when the people that trust you the most see the truth.

Suddenly, one of the crew members flung himself off a wall and jumped toward Thrite, slamming his head on a physical set of buttons beneath the window. As the two fought, and the crew member continued slamming Thrite's head across the physical command displays, the buttons unlocked some of the cuffs, including Xi's.

Tossing them to the side, she noticed Laura's cuffs had been deactivated alongside half of the captives. As chaos ensued within the enclosed command room, Laura noticed that some of the members of her group still had locked cuffs.

Turning over to look at Xi, she yelled, "Find a way to open the command room doorway! I have to unlock *every* cuff."

With a nod, Xi flew towards the door and noticed that it was fingerprint activated. A high ranking officer flew over next to her, looked at her face with a nervous stare that said, *we're on the same side now, right?* Looking up at the officer with determination, she managed to speak one word.

"Unlock."

Almost immediately, the officer frantically slammed his thumb onto the sensor, and the door slid open with a loud hiss. What followed was the diffusion of chaos across the ship as all survivors and crew members scrambled to search for escape pods. Xi zoomed through corridors with frantic people as they made one last shot at survival. Meanwhile, the few that remained within the command room were either cuffed to the ship or the even fewer fighting Thrite in a last attempt to change the ship's direction. They didn't know that the reroute was set to be permanent. Even if the ship *did* stop, it was too close to Jupiter to escape. Most of the crew had given up on pausing the ship, and soon, the few that voluntarily remained were a singular crew member, still throwing punches at Thrite as they spun across the room, and Laura.

Laura frantically slammed buttons in hopes of deactivating the cuffs. With the sound of a trigger, then that of burning, Laura turned around to find that Thrite had shot the crew member through his stomach, and was now nearing her, his face heavily vascular from god-knows-what. With the press of a final button, each cuff in the room went off, allowing all captives to leave.

"I'll hold him back. Go!" yelled one of them.

Nodding, Laura zipped across Thrite as the captive swooped him by the leg. Leaving the command room, she shut the door and thanked the captive quietly.

Xi was lost alongside every other person searching for a pod.

It's almost as if they purposely made it impossible for us to find an escape pod.

Take two rights. Then a left. Take the officer with you— there is another scanner there.

Looking at the officer in front of her, she turned him around and said, "I know where the pods are."

Following the turns, Xi's confidence in her movements had spun up quite a large group of people, each person hoping she knew where she was going. Once they approached the pod hall entrance, the officer slammed his thumb, and a flurry of people flooded into the room, each person flying at fast speeds. There was likely just an almost perfect amount of pods, each one fitting two people. Even then, with two thirds of the ship dead, it seemed as if people would be struggling to find space soon. Xi jumped into a spherical pod, prepped the entrance, and waited for Laura to arrive.

With a spark of turbulence, lights across the entirety of the ship began flickering intensely. People began screaming in heightened panic. The first of the escape pods took off, some facing directly towards Jupiter during takeoff. How unfortunate. Laura rushed into the hall, saw Xi at the first pod to her right. The two looked up at each other with a smile.

We live.

With a blinding flash of light, Laura's grip on the pod's entrance loosened, and she floated back as her smile faded into… *nothing.* Xi was confused at first, but when she saw burn marks forming alongside clotted blood at the side of Laura's head, she realized what had happened.

Laura's dead.

A bloody and disgruntled Thrite kicked Laura's body to the side as he stared at Xi, cornered up within the pod. Xi couldn't do anything but watch the world from within her head. She went deaf, her once lively self becoming as empty as the lonely explorer hundreds of kilometers away from her. As Thrite raised his pistol at her head, she didn't flinch, didn't move, didn't even blink. She was ready for death's embrace. The world had shown Xi a side colder than the void the ship had been traveling through.

As his fingers neared the trigger, Molz tackled him to the side, slamming the takeoff button to the side. Xi remained reactionless, staring outwards with the same dead smile she had when she saw Laura before her death, as the airlock door hissed, and ejected the pod. Engines activated, and the pod was pushed off the ship at fast speeds. Xi sat there, seatbelt on, still staring off into the space across the hardened glass windows of the pod door. Though it seemed as if nothing was going through her mind, she was lost in thought.

Why did Molz have to save me… I do not know where to go next. I have more suffering to endure. Everybody I know dearly is on that ship. And now they're… they're gone. I don't even love my parents anymore, not after this.

I'm not letting you die. Do you understand? If we time everything perfectly, we have a chance at hitting Mars.

Xi did not respond; not even through her thoughts.

Set the throttle to 80. Follow my guide. We will slingshot off of Jupiter.

Xi set the throttle to 80, and followed each step the being told her, even if it was without any thought behind her actions. Something within her still fought to live; quite literally. As she curved around Jupiter, she saw one last glimpse of the ship. She watched from the side as it fell into its surface. Though it likely hadn't been entirely consumed by Jupiter at this point, her perspective made it seem as if it had fallen directly into the gas giant. Anybody that still remained on the ship was likely dead, neither way. After each step was given and followed, the ship could no longer be seen, and the pod was set on autopilot. Once the being stopped giving its guide, it went silent. Xi spoke within her mind for once after all the elapsed time of silence.

Will Mars be better than death?

No response.

29

Finale

Base Brona, 1 mile south of Galgoria.

"Krinth would later regret his actions. Because of him, Semias made a hit list."

-**Tale of Humanity, unknown author.**

It was nearing sunset by the time Drepno and the others arrived at Brona. Unlike Astral, this base was hidden within a cliff face that looked

directly down on Galgoria. As the megalopolis was set mostly in a crater, even if Brona was a mile away from the city, you could still view a stunning portion of its massive, dark skyscrapers looming over the red lands of Mars.

As the Humvees pulled into the outdoor entrance, Drepno noticed the obvious scurrying of vehicles and personnel into the parking area. These vehicles were different in style and type, as if they each came from different rebellious groups.

Drepno turned to Krinth and asked, "Why is there so much movement? Shouldn't these people be quiet because of the Iron Hawks, especially since we're *right* next to Galgoria?"

"There *is* no Galgoria anymore, Drepno. Not even a Unionar."

"What?-"

Krinth tossed a small display into Drepno's hands. Looking at it, Drepno saw news report after news report making the same statement, with each interrupted via GUH intervention. After each report was shut down, an emergency announcement by Matthew Knowles, the leader of the GUH, was displayed. As each report cycled around, Drepno could form an idea.

With what started with the leak of a transmission from Jupiter... A catalyst... Multiple different sources have been confirmed... All across the Solar System, hundreds of other leaks have occurred... Protests gather at... Reports of unrest within civilian and military ships...

Staring at the display, Drepno could only think; *Catalyst? These other groups were waiting for us?*

"Drepno. The Grand Unionar of Humanity was protecting itself with a thick wall— one aimed in an entirely wrong direction. They completely

overlooked how a misled population responds to reality. They forget that people can lose themselves, dissociate with what they thought they once were. Come on, let's go."

Getting out of the vehicle alongside Jezra and the others, everyone quickly ran into the base's entrance. As he entered, Drepno noticed how people in the crowded building stopped their frantic actions to stare at him. People would pause the news reports they were watching to simply stare at him and Jezra. Stepping into a loud control room, with one-way camouflaged windows displaying the sight of the ink-black Galgoria, Drepno was overwhelmed by the movements and sounds of people as they looked at recordings from Earth and colonies across the Solar System. Stasny sat within a corner of the command room with what could be considered the last two of the 'Chosen Five'. Looking back outside, he saw that the sun had aligned itself right between the manmade horizon of several skyscrapers, painting the sky in a dark red.

Krinth tapped on his shoulder, and said, "This too much for you? I have a better place," before walking outside the control room. Before Drepno left the room, he looked back at the city, and noticed small flashes emerge at random points throughout Galgoria.

Explosions.

Following Krinth, they entered a staircase. For the next minute that the two climbed up the stairs, loud impact explosions could be heard from a distance.

"Are those ships?"

"Yep. Some lose control as people fight each other within them, others directly dive into the city in an act of protest, and others just slip

from the spaceport. The world is an angry place, Drepno. It's getting madder by the second."

As they neared the top, the once metallic walls of the stairwell became granite, then red sandstone. Reaching the top, Krinth swung open a horizontal door and waited outside for Drepno. Stepping outside, Drepno saw what could only be described as dream-like; a sky etched in dark red as the fireball that is the setting sun set itself above the chaos within Galgoria. Even at this distance, the sheer size of Galgoria meant that this chaos now filled the entirety of the horizon.

Stepping outside of the staircase, Drepno realized that they were on top of the cliff overhang facing the city. With a loud boom of air, a massive ship— quite easily thirty times the size of Base Brona— flew overhead, its hull burning as it passed through the atmosphere, and crashed straight into the central wall of Galgoria, splitting into massive chunks of metal as it crashed into the bulky skyscrapers of the city. A bright flash of light— much like that of an atomic bomb— burst into the air as the ship's propulsion systems collided with the ground, splitting and grinding past tower after tower, chunks of the ship separating and falling on city streets.

Drepno fell to his knees as he stared at the burning city of Galgoria, its pitch black buildings now ablaze in the chaos of rebellion. The shockwave of the ship's collapse into Galgoria took a while to reach the two of them, but when it did, it almost deafened Drepno, making his ears bleed. The sound of shattering glass could be heard below. Krinth still stood there, basking in the awe of what he saw.

Touching his ears, Drepno blankly stared at the blood on his hands. Though he couldn't hear himself through the ringing in his ears, he managed to mutter something.

"...What now?"

Looking down at Drepno, Krinth responded after enough time for his hearing to be partially restored.

"A great amount of things are going to change, Drepno. Things won't be 'civil' anymore. We'll fight off any resistance the Unionar still has, and by the end of it, we *will* be set. The Martian National Guard is fighting itself, even. Reports of conflicts between Cariveer divisions in the Valles Marineris Canyons have appeared. Look at those Galgorian Guard ships above the city, they can't even work together anymore."

Krinth tossed Drepno a binocular.

Staring through it, his eyes widened. Magnifying the display of the binoculars, he saw groups of protestors taking cover from the guard ships stationed above Galgoria, raining death from above. Every once in a while, a guard ship would begin moving uncontrollably, crashing into Galgoria or opening fire on allied ships and hovcars.

The GUH hadn't anticipated any of this.

Krinth spoke, "Tonight, I launch a joint invasion with the Javian rebel group on several Cariveer air bases. Once we take their bombers, we'll finalize our raid of the Valles Marineris by killing off Division 14 of the Martian National Guard. They're known for their display of the GUH. By ripping away their pride, we rip away *everything* else."

Drepno dropped the binoculars.

How much blood must be spilled before people are freed?

30

Plans

Io, 1 month after the Catalyst.

"Shortly after the collapse of the GUH, hundreds, if not thousands of groups appeared, each making an attempt at governing themselves. Distant planets and moons lost supply chains, killing billions more. The Solar System fragmented, and the race for the Mirror System soon began.."

-Tale of Humanity, unknown author.

Matteos stroked his thick beard as he stared out into the bright yellow landscape of Io. Staring through a module's windows, he noticed the contrast between the volcanic yellow landscape and the empty black space above it. He thought of what was happening above him, what bodies were still floating in space, if anyone he knew was still out there— if EXO was still out there. He jumped across the tube-structured base module and entered the airlock halls. Putting a thermal suit on, he felt the hissing and clicking of the oxygen systems activating. After placing his velcro helmet on— the same one he used on Europa, he looked for the final layer of his space suit. As he stared at the hanging suit, he noticed the red stains on the right arm sleeve. Closing his eyes, he stood there for several seconds.

I must forget.

He then opened his eyes, sliding into the last bulky layer of equipment. Before activating the airlock, he grabbed a display map of Io just in case he'd get lost. Within the map, various sulfur drill site symbols could be seen scattered across the northern hemisphere of the moon. By

now, most mining bases were likely empty. As the airlock hissed on, Matteos considered what he should add to his modular tent, if there were any new sections he could find on the northern hemisphere. Walking out, he noticed how *quiet* things were out there. Even though it was quiet already living by himself, it couldn't get quieter than this. The already-silent vacuum of space only realized this silence. Walking to his shuttle, he turned around to face his current base. It was larger than the tent he had set up on Europa, mostly due to the fact that he'd managed to find more inflatable sections and modules around Io. Behind his tent, Jupiter took up a great portion of the horizon, with the sun left of it from his perspective.

Entering the shuttle, Matteos took a seat. Powering up the shuttle, he looked back at the EXO charging port.

It's empty now, isn't it.

Staring at the console in front of him, he set the shuttle's direction to a mine on the northern hemisphere. He was going out to gather more modules for his current settlement. Feeling the inertia of the shuttle's initiating movements, he felt his head press against the headrest. He stared out as the ship 'hovered' over Io's landscape, each volcano or geyser moving across the land. The flat landscape began to curve as he gained altitude. Every now and then, he'd look up and spot a floating shuttle, likely abandoned.

Once he'd reached an area on the northern hemisphere, he set his shuttle perpendicular to the ground in order for him to load cargo in easily. As the shuttle descended, Matteos got a clear view of the dark space above him. He was currently on the bright side of the moon, so stars and such

weren't visible. However, he *did* see something above him. A very distant object. Even then, it managed to reflect a portion of the sunlight that hit it.

Matteos squinted.

An orange letter was discernible from the strange mass above him.

"E"

EXO? Matteos changed the optics of the shuttle window to get a clear view of the object. Floating there, in the void between Io and the rest of the universe, was a ripped portion of EXO. It was in its pillar formation, meaning that its battery and memory could still be intact without it being spread across in its nerve formation.

Matteos' eyes widened. He couldn't control himself.

"E... EXO!!!"

Sweating within his space suit, he reversed the landing maneuver and set the shuttle to full throttle. As the nuclear drive took off of the moon, a clear burn mark could be seen. Though the object was way farther than it appeared, Matteos *knew* it was EXO, and was willing to go to any length to get it back. As he neared the object, he slammed the slowing maneuvers of the shuttle on, and prepared his suit for depressurization. As the cabin filled with the hiss of depressurization, he frantically attached a carabiner to his space suit. With the slide of the entry door, Matteos was quick to slide himself out into the void his ship was exposed to. Grabbing onto the shuttle's entrance, he crawled his way around the shuttle's hull and attached his carabiner with shaking hands. Looking to his right, he saw that EXO's remains were nearing him as the ship slowed.

Bracing his legs for a jump, Matteos double checked that his carabiner was in place, looking out into the space around him. Everywhere

was void, except for the view behind him, where Io and Jupiter took up most of it. In front of the ship stood the sun, blinding him each time he looked at it. As EXO's remains now stood directly behind his back, he realized it was now or never.

With a pushing force Matteos never knew he had, he kicked himself off the shuttle, hoping the carabiner's rope would be long enough to allow him to reach for EXO. As he zoomed out towards EXO, he looked up at it and saw the beauty of Jupiter and Io. Looking back, he noticed the slack between his body and the carabiner dwindling.

Just a little more time is all I need. Please, thought Matteos as he bit his lip. EXO was now only 50 feet away. Each second, he grew closer and closer. With a final thrust, he latched onto EXO, the carabiner's slack disappearing and pulling them back towards the shuttle. The carabiner's sudden tightening shook Matteos, and he almost lost his hold on EXO's remains. As he activated thrusters on his suit's back, he looked at the little that was left of EXO. Reading the identification code, he was now entirely certain it was the EXO he knew. Rotating its rectangular structure, Matteos saw within the half of it that it was missing, with its back full of exposed wiring and circuitry. *Its central chip has to be here, somewhere.*

Entering the shuttle with EXO and repressurizing the cabin, he arranged EXO's pillars out into the air. Probing his hands through machinery, he noticed a patch of metal engulfing something within EXO's circuitry. As he neared his hand, he watched as the metal expanded for him, allowing his hands to reach through and grab whatever was inside. EXO used up its last portion of energy for this. Matteos realized then, that EXO had purposefully shifted itself into a pillar formation before the NCC

imploded, all in the hopes that he'd eventually find it's central chip intact. Pulling his hand back, Matteos watched in sobbing joy as a small chip, no larger than his thumb, lay in his hands. He quickly put the chip into a pocket, and set the shuttle to land immediately at one of the abandoned outposts. *There has to be an exoskeleton on one of these bases...*

As the shuttle made contact with the yellow sulfur-induced surface, he jumped out of the shuttle and jumped across the landscape, nearing a distant outpost. Though it looked as if it were abandoned before the Catalyst, Matteos held firm to the hope that an exoskeleton was there. Sliding the airlock entrance open, Matteos stood as the fluorescent lights buzzed on and the base's airlock systems activated once more after years of inaction. Entering the base, Matteos kept his helmet on.

I don't trust old airlocks.

After an hour of searching throughout each of the sections, Matteos noticed a strange curve on the floor he was on. Hearing the crunch of the ground he walked on when in this particular room, he realized this wasn't a metallic floor, but one made of a tarp cover. Running over to a corner of the section, he pulled out the knife he'd used in the NCC, and slashed across the ground.

The floor tore open.

Pulling the dark yellow fabric across the room, Matteos looked back at what he uncovered. His eyes widened. The floor was filled to the brim with old shuttle-purpose exoskeletons, all boxed up in pillar formation and compactly hidden below the floor.

Oh shit, this was an exoskeleton packaging base.

A grin spread across Matteos' face.

I'll find you a body, EXO.

After marking the base's position on the map of Io, Matteos picked up an exoskeleton and set it on top of an activation table within another section of the base. Turning the exoskeleton around, Matteos slid in the chip EXO had given him. Within the next ten minutes, he waited, standing on the opposite side of the room from the exoskeleton. However, he soon heard a strange noise coming from the exoskeleton as some strange mechanism whirred within it. A display suddenly activated, and Matteos heard a voice come from the exoskeleton as it twitched its pillars. In a surprisingly fast movement, the exoskeleton stood up and stared directly at Matteos. He quickly moved over to where the exoskeleton was.

"I remember you," said the exoskeleton.

"Do you remember my name?"

"M–Ma–Matteos. I only remember portions of— everything."

"Do *you* remember *your* name?"

The exoskeleton stood still for a while, before responding.

"What would you like to call me? What *did* you call me?"

"Exo."

END

BOOK 1: UNIONAR

BOOK 2: SEMIAS

BOOK 3: RIONAR

BOOK 4: GODS

(Below this line are testing chapters and extra info that will be placed FAR into the series, so for spoilers' sake don’t read it)

The grand twist of the story; society hasn't greatly developed, because the main need for peak technological growth is nested under quantum physics and the study of various dimensions. However, the GUH had taken over the world to halt technological progress in quantum research. Why? Because they needed to *hide.* For millions upon billions of years, various dimensions had gone to war with one another, to ensure that any chance of a dual vector foil attack wouldn’t exist, as lower dimensions pose a threat to higher dimensions. In total, there are 5 dimensions. The 5th was attempting to eliminate all life in the 4th and vice versa. Through sheer luck, the 4th had managed to wipe out (most of) the 5th, but was entangled in a battle with various life forms in the third; our dimension. Soon, the 4th dimension had prospered in the conflict and began narrowing down into the 2nd and 1st lifeforms, which were too unintelligent to be considered a threat. However, they had found a strange uniqueness within the 3rd, so they decided to create galaxies in it (way more than you could ever imagine lmao) to watch life prosper, eliminating those who make contact with each other to ensure stability, and those who have gained enough technological progress in the study of dimensions and quantum physics, to the point in which they’d be considered a threat to the 4th. In a single communication with another extraterrestrial civilization,

the GUH came to the conclusion of formation, ensuing centuries worth of control in order to keep Humanity alive.

Semias Umbra